
FINAL FANTASY XV THE JRPG REINVENTED
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Thinner, lighter, it's
the cutting edge.



It's not always the one who breaks new ground that gets the plaudits, so much as the one who proves that the ground is fertile. Such is the case with *Gears Of War*, a game that I would never dream of calling innovative or original, but which I would call impactful, influential and resonant. The third-person cover shooter had its vocabulary established by *Gears Of War*; it was given a gameplay benchmark to reach for and the industry as a whole was given a visual standard for the generation.

Being the first is noteworthy, but being the best is ultimately what counts. Conversations about *Gears* invariably turn to *Resident Evil 4* and *Killswitch*, but whether these games were the true innovators or not doesn't really matter. Well-established franchises like *Tomb Raider* or *Grand Theft Auto* didn't add waist-high cover systems because of *Killswitch*. They didn't model their gunplay on *Resi 4*.

So, while I accept the various caveats with regards to its place in the gaming hall of fame that it was derivative of other titles and perhaps has more than a thing or two to answer for in terms of having a negative influence on the industry (space marines, dude-bro attitudes), *Gears* remains a massively important game in my mind. Perhaps the greatest challenge for *Gears Of War 4* is that it somehow has to live up to that legacy.

Jon Gordon

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR






Traveled 173 mi Day 7

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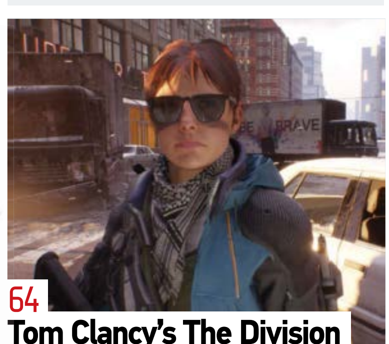
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30 Feature

GEARS OF WAR 4

The Coalition tells us how it's picking up the mantle of Epic Games, as we give our multiplayer impressions

Discuss

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IS IT TIME TO UPDATE?

Does PlayStation VR have what it takes to dominate?

→ With reports of an improved PS4 console on the way, as well as the full reveal of PlayStation VR, this could be one of the most tumultuous years of the generation to date

Sony has found itself in quite the precarious position. Thanks to the unprecedented success of the PlayStation 4 – and an enthusiastic reveal of PlayStation VR – Sony is now in a domineering position of power in both the videogame and technology industries. The company now has the ability to influence the market in a very tangible way, and it's one bad decision away from tearing years of hard work and success to the ground.

That's something of a terrifying realisation, because in 2016 the company could either strengthen the PS4 user base or irretrievably split it; it could successfully bring virtual reality into the homes of millions or sully the VR-dream before it even has a chance to realise its true potential. That's the sort of power Shuhei Yoshida is wielding right now, and it's making this year one of the most important (and exciting) in our industry's history.

Sony has finally unveiled PSVR to the world, and it is – on paper, at least – looking like a very attractive alternative to the Oculus Rift (£499.99), not to mention the high-end HTC Vive (£689), thanks to a comparatively low entry price point of £349.99. That gets you the headset, a pair of stereo headphones, and all of the cables you'll need to plug it into your PS4 and get jacked into a new wave of VR-compatible games due to arrive in October alongside the hardware.

That price point has won Sony a lot of praise from analysts, journalists and enthusiasts alike, especially as the news arrived alongside confirmation that the company would indeed be selling PSVR at a profit – typically, new hardware releases at a loss (with software making up the difference) until manufacturers can lower the cost of production. But, the truth is, this isn't because Sony has employed an army of techno-wizards, it's because it is having to making some compromises to get it to market at this price, and that actually has us a little concerned. Oculus could have released the Rift at a lower price point too, but, as founder Palmer Luckey has stated on numerous occasions in the past, "optimising quality over cost" was far too important for the company when it came to realising VR at a consumer level.

Had Oculus gone ahead and taken an updated

> "The £150 price gulf between the Rift and PSVR isn't actually as big as you may expect"

DATA STREAM → SONY HAS CLOSED DRIVECLUB AND MOTORSTORM DEVELOPER EVOLUTION STUDIO

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Development Kit 2 build to market in 2015 (as originally intended), it would have featured a single display; the resolution was making its flagship games look poor and causing headaches, as the 60fps framerate was low enough that people were perceiving flicker, which can cause motion sickness. These are problems that have disappeared in the final retail unit available now, thanks to the improved technology that boasts two 1080 x 1200 pixel OLED displays (one for each eye), a 90Hz refresh rate and a 110-degree field of view.

Oculus has made it a requirement that games on its platform run at 90fps, widely considered the sweet spot for VR comfort by developers. Sony, on the other hand, has set a mandate that stable 60fps is the minimum – even going as far as recognising that rendering at this framerate could cause discomfort in an International Game Summit presentation – but by not enforcing a 90fps standard Sony could be introducing a device to market that doesn't show off the true potential of VR, it could in fact damage its reputation. It also doesn't help that PSVR is only boasting a resolution of 960 x 1080 pixels for each eye across a single display and a narrower 100-degree field of view. Oculus – through the likes of *EVE: Valkyrie*, *Edge Of Nowhere* and *Chronos* – has truly impressed, and we've yet to see anything on par yet visually from PSVR.



Above The PlayStation VR tech is much more reasonably priced than its competitors, but that is at the expence of its internal specs, which are lower.



Sony, to its credit, hasn't backed down from the assertion that it is releasing technology that isn't quite on par with either of its competitors – in fact it has openly admitted it. "If you just talk about the high-end quality, yes, I would admit that Oculus may have better VR," PlayStation executive vice president Masayasu Ito recently confirmed in an interview with Polygon. "However, it requires a very expensive and very fast PC."

There are a few points to note here. Firstly, reports of early PSVR demos are relatively positive, though it is widely noted that – in terms of smoothness and graphical fidelity – Oculus and Vive are outpacing it. It's also worth considering that the reason Sony is unwilling to raise the frame-rate benchmark up from 60fps is that the moderately powerful PS4 may indeed not be able to run some of its more impressive VR games at anything higher – that's a reality of the hardware currently available. And if you're of the mind that Sony is winning the VR race because of the £150 price gulf between the Rift and PSVR, it isn't actually as big as you may expect: improved hardware

Reader Reaction

Your thoughts on the virtual reality battle ahead

Are you on board with the PSVR price point?

No, not for me
Still not sure
Yes, I'm getting PSVR

Which of the leading VR formats excites you the most?

Oculus Rift
HTC Vive
PlayStation VR



 THE PS4 AND XBOX ONE HAVE SOLD A COMBINED 5.1 MILLION UNITS IN THE UK SO FAR THIS GEN

Inset Sony will be looking to games like *RIGS* to offer the kind of engaging and long-term gaming experience its hardcore fanbase will demand.



Above *The Playroom VR* might have the kind of cross-market appeal that will make Sony's VR hardware this generation's Kinect… but we're not sure.



Above Experiences revolving around horror elements are likely to be the big hits across VR as the more immersive interaction has pretty clear design benefits.

of the Rift aside, it's also being bundled with an Xbox One controller, positional tracking camera, a remote and a handful of games – Sony, on the other hand, requires you to purchase a PlayStation camera, as well as purchasing Move controllers and games separately. It all starts to add up.

And so it comes down to the age-old argument, the high-end PC debacle. With 40 million PS4s out there in the world, an expendable £350 (or closer to £400 if you don't already own the PS Camera) may seem within reach. If you don't own the console already, you can pick one up for £300, and you know there will be some bundles come October. It's easier to talk about the PlayStation experience in these terms because it's essentially impossible for us to know how many people own a VR-ready gaming PC, or one that could be easily and relatively inexpensively upgraded to get it up to spec. Dropping £800 – £1000 on a brand new system doesn't seem appealing, but that's the price if you want VR the way it's supposed to be experienced; a common concern that plagues the PC faithful. Though, if rumours are to be believed, it may also be a concern to many of the 40 million of you that have already purchased a PS4.

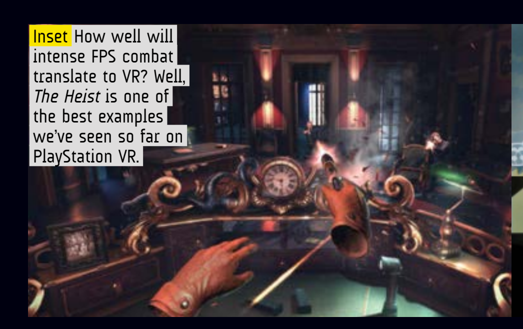
> "Just two and a half years out from launch, there's reportedly a brand new PlayStation 4 in the works"

Just two and a half years out from launch, there's reportedly a brand new PlayStation 4 in the works – internally dubbed the PS4K – that's boasting more powerful CPU and GPU architecture. While sources have confirmed to the likes of The Wall Street Journal, Kotaku and Digital Foundry that the existing PS4 will stay in production, this does have the potential to greatly impact the future of Sony's console business.

Rumours have this improved console launching just ahead of PSVR in October, designed to vastly improve Sony's chances of competing with the high-end VR experiences available on PC. If true, this would provide a solution to the potential framerate problems facing PSVR games – it would also likely increase their sharpness and graphical effects too, though there's no getting around the fact that the device can only display 960×1080 per eye.

An incremental improvement to the PlayStation VR experience then, but the bigger impact – and potential problems – surround how this could effect the rest of the ecosystem. An increase to the PS4's processing power would allow it to output media – and possibly games – at Ultra High Definition (4K) resolution. While the systems would reportedly share the same software pool for the foreseeable future, the act of introducing improved CPU and GPU architecture, even were it to remain x86-based, could actually introduce compatibility issues for older titles – not to mention further demands on already strained developers to upscale games for the improved system. And besides, developers are sure to want to take advantage of improved processing power to make their games run smoother or look even better, so where does this leave owners of the original PS4?

The implications of Sony introducing the 'PS4K' aren't clear. Its mantra has always been 'for the players', and yet releasing a high-end device less than three years after the original launch seems inherently



Inset How well will intense FPS combat translate to VR? Well, *The Heist* is one of the best examples we've seen so far on PlayStation VR.

DATA STREAM → SERVERS FOR THE PS2 AND XBOX 360 VERSIONS OF FINAL FANTASY XI HAVE BEEN CLOSED



anti-consumer. Worse still, if the PSVR is only going to reach its best with a new PS4 system – who knows, it may even require it – this means there will be a substantial increase to the price of entry.

At this stage, the PS4K is a rumour that's steadily gaining more and more steam, and Sony refusing to comment is only fanning the flames. At such an early stage in the lifecycle of the console, not to mention VR, splitting both the developer and consumer base between two sets of hardware seems to be an unnecessary risk – especially for a company that's already well ahead of the competition in the console wars. But that all said, Sony hasn't done wrong to the gamers this generation, so for now all we can do is trust that the company knows what it's doing in these excitingly uncertain times.



Is PlayStation 4 really for the players?

→ As Microsoft opens up Xbox One for cross-console play, the battle for gaming hearts is heating up like never before

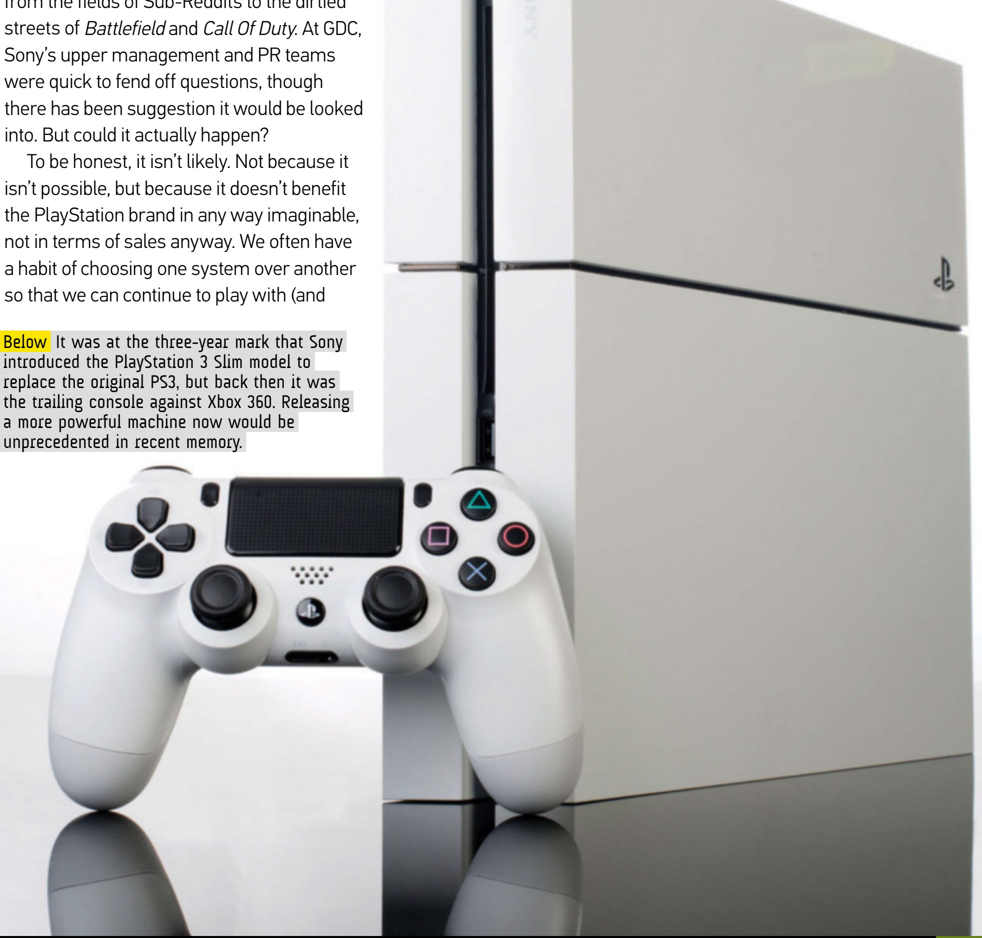
■ IS SONY'S 'FOR the players' mantra more than a clever marketing slogan? It's worked wonders for the PlayStation 4 so far, adorning every game and system announcement over the three years – not to mention all of the backhanded assaults made on the Xbox One – helping in no small part to grow the user base of the console to 40 million worldwide. But it seems as if Sony is finally being put to the test by a surprising revelation from Microsoft regarding multiplayer server parity.

Xbox made an unexpected announcement: the Xbox One is opening itself up to support cross-platform play. Not only between Xbox One and PC owners, but for PS4 owners too – were Sony to allow it. The idea that we could play with friends regardless of what platform they owned has rocked the industry; it's a service that's long been sought after by players, but the realities of server technologies and business practises have kept it at arms length.

But here we are in 2016, with the possibility of a full-scale console war shifting from the fields of Sub-Reddits to the dirtied streets of *Battlefield* and *Call Of Duty*. At GDC, Sony's upper management and PR teams were quick to fend off questions, though there has been suggestion it would be looked into. But could it actually happen?

To be honest, it isn't likely. Not because it isn't possible, but because it doesn't benefit the PlayStation brand in any way imaginable, not in terms of sales anyway. We often have a habit of choosing one system over another so that we can continue to play with (and against) our buddies. That's why you may have seen companies fighting so forcefully over DLC exclusivity for the likes of *FIFA* and *COD* – whoever has the more attractive offering will likely attract an early adopter, and then their friends will follow.

The thing is, Sony has already taken an almost uncatchable lead this generation. It has a strategic advantage – a ridiculous install base – over the Xbox One that Microsoft had no way of combating, until now at least. But now Sony is left either looking like the bad guy, restricting players from playing with their friends regardless of personal console preference; or maintaining the notion that it truly is for the players and letting Microsoft scoop up some of its users with an array of dazzling exclusives. It's a difficult situation for Sony to be in, and it isn't likely the pressure will relent for this feature to become a reality any time soon.



Below It was at the three-year mark that Sony introduced the PlayStation 3 Slim model to replace the original PS3, but back then it was the trailing console against Xbox 360. Releasing a more powerful machine now would be unprecedented in recent memory.

→ XBOX ONE OWNERS WILL BE ABLE TO TURN THEIR CONSOLES INTO DEV KITS FOR FREE THIS SUMMER 

FROM GAMER TO CREATOR

Felicia Day's tips for streaming success

→We chat with the founder of Geek & Sundry about what it takes to become a successful YouTuber

Drawing on her history as a gamer, Felicia Day's *World Of Warcraft*-inspired web series *The Guild* ran for six seasons and racked up tens of millions of views. Day has since channelled her online creativity into setting up her own YouTube network, Geek & Sundry, so we thought we would pick her brain about what it takes to turn passion into content. "I think YouTube personalities are under-appreciated," she says. "It's not just a person throwing a camera up in their bedroom. *Some* of them might be, but anything that's good and stands out, it's not just somebody putting no effort into it. You have to appreciate everyone's artistry, whether you're a Let's Player or a Viner or a vlogger, it's very surprising how much goes into it, even if it's just one person doing it. It's all-consuming."

1. Practice, practice, practice

"If you're a vlogger, just start talking to the camera and find your voice. Don't even post videos, maybe, just do it as a diary until you feel like 'Oh, I've figured out what I want to say and the unique thing I want to communicate to everyone.' I think the most important thing is to figure out how to make it not feel like work."

2. Love what you do

"You have to be passion-driven in the video business because sometimes it can be a very long haul to success. If you're just doing it for external reasons, you're going to lose interest if you don't get positive reinforcement from the external world. Or, if you just become famous overnight for something you don't love, then it's unfulfilling."

3. Think about the other side of the camera

"There are a lot of other video-making aspects behind the camera and around the camera, and you don't necessarily need to be the face of it to make things. I think we're attracted to the glamorous stuff, which is the stuff that gets you famous, which is the face stuff. But really, the stuff behind the scenes is just as important and fulfilling if that's what you want to do with your life. So volunteer, track down people in your area, say 'Hey, let me just help you', and you can learn that way as much as doing it by yourself in isolation."

4. You don't need training

The world is full of people expressing themselves in video, and you shouldn't feel inhibited and not do something just because you're not trained. Half of the things I've learned as an actress, the most valuable ones have been while I was hired to do something, on set. So you should certainly educate yourself, but doing is definitely part of the learning process, especially in video-making.

5. Find something unique to you

I would definitely try to think about what you have that's unique. What do you want to say about the world? When you watch other people's things, what would you do different? What inspires you? Sometimes it's really about digging and saying 'What is it that I am offering that's not out there right now? What inspires me to pick up a camera?' It's about cobbling together your own vision.

Felicia Day's book, You've Never Weird On The Internet, is available now from all good book retailers

Felicia Day's *Dragon Age* character Tallis as she appeared in the expansion *Mark Of The Assassin*. She also wrote and starred in a series of live-action shorts for the franchise called *Dragon Age: Redemption*.



EVERYBODY'S GONE TO THE RAPTURE HAS BEEN CONFIRMED FOR PC, RELEASE DATE TO BE ANNOUNCED

> Luckily, Final Fantasy already has a few decent breadwinners in the family

End of the road for Final Fantasy?

We need to talk about *Final Fantasy XV*. It's not that I don't think it looks good – I've played various flavours of *Duscae* as well as the new *Platinum* demo, all of which I've enjoyed to varying degrees. It's not that I don't like the setting or characters – I've developed quite a soft spot for Noct's royal entourage and believe there's scope for Square to encourage diversity by extending the guest list later on. It's not even that I miss menus; going back to early games in the series can be a real chore, especially after *XII*, *XIII* (for all its flaws) and *XIV* all pushed combat in interesting new directions and we tend to forget how easy it is for turn-based affairs to fall flat. No, my chief concern right now is that ludicrous sales expectations could end up being the death of one of my favourite franchises.

Director Hajime Tabata recently let slip something of a wildly optimistic figure: they'd like to sell ten million copies of *FFXV*. We don't know whether that's a break-even point, a milestone where the publisher would view it as a success, or even to what degree this expectation takes into account the game's previous development as *Versus XIII*. But ten million is a big, scary number regardless of any of that, particularly when there's only one game in the entire franchise that has outperformed that (no prizes for guessing which) and when a far less ambitious game with a much shorter dev cycle fell short of expectations despite shifting over three million units in its first month, you have to wonder what hope there is for a game ten years in the making to ever end up with that many buyers.

Luckily, *Final Fantasy* already has a few decent breadwinners in the family – revamped MMO *A Realm Reborn* does exceptionally well and still has millions of active players, while the mobile arm of the franchise does its fair share of business as well, the likes of *Theatrhythm*, *Record Keeper* and *Exvius* all remaining relevant in the face of heavy competition in the F2P market. As a result, I'm hopeful that *XV* won't be the *Final Fantasy* that lives up to the series' name no matter how it does at retail, especially when the realised dream that is the *FFVII* remake has the potential to be one of Square's biggest releases ever, as long as everything goes according to plan.

The question then is whether Square is spreading itself too thinly with *XV*. When development has already taken the scenic route, can we really expect things to be any smoother with the additional load of bespoke demos, anime series, movies, clothing lines and lord-knows what else added to the slate? A world of fresh, diverse content; is that going to be enough? It's been a bumpy ride for Noctis and friends but the end is finally in sight – here's hoping the lads can deliver the goods and do us proud, because I don't even want to imagine a games industry without *FF* in it. Yes, even after *XIII*. No, I'm not sorry.



Luke Albigés is Editor of **Retro Gamer** magazine and has everything crossed for Noctis' band of brothers to succeed

Import Watch

→ Phantasy Star Online 2 (PS4)

It's been available for some time on PC and Vita but another platform for Sega's mini-MMO sequel gives us another chance to get upset about the fact that the publisher has no interest in releasing the game outside of Japan. Given how popular MMOs are on a global scale, it's a real shame that the follow-up to the game that first took bold strides into that sector on console won't be coming west but this release at least gives anyone without a PC the easiest option so far for braving the language barrier and getting involved all the same.



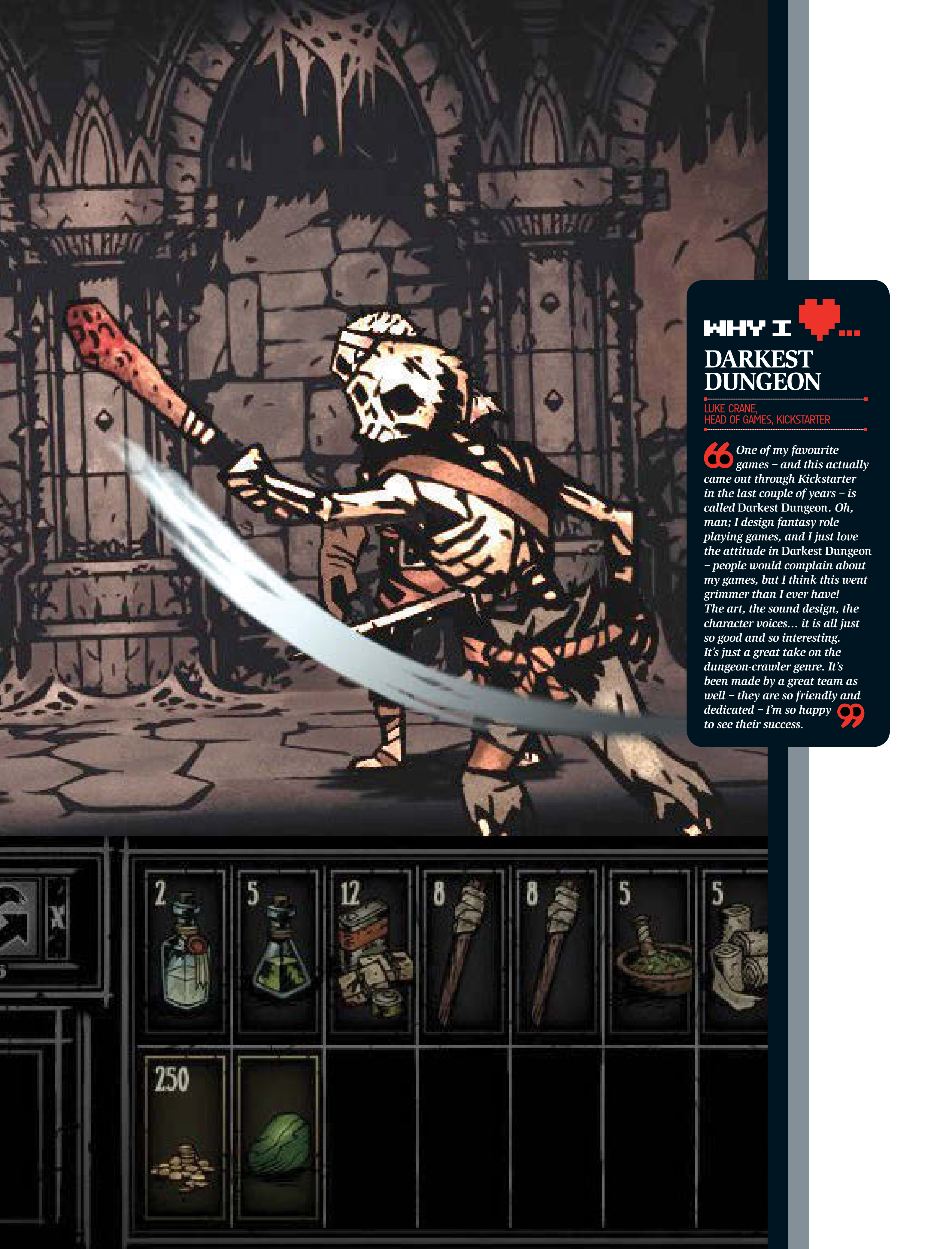


HOMEFRONT: THE REVOLUTION WILL HAVE AN ARCADE MACHINE WITH TWO TIMESPLITTERS 2 LEVELS ON IT



"I just love the attitude in Darkest Dungeon – people would complain about my games, but I think this went grimmer than I ever have"

LUKE CRANE, HEAD OF GAMES, KICKSTARTER



WHY I ♥…

DARKEST DUNGEON

LUKE CRANE,
HEAD OF GAMES, KICKSTARTER

“*One of my favourite games – and this actually came out through Kickstarter in the last couple of years – is called* Darkest Dungeon*. Oh, man; I design fantasy role playing games, and I just love the attitude in* Darkest Dungeon *– people would complain about my games, but I think this went grimmer than I ever have! The art, the sound design, the character voices… it is all just so good and so interesting. It's just a great take on the dungeon-crawler genre. It's been made by a great team as well – they are so friendly and dedicated – I'm so happy to see their success.*”

Doom

CONCEPT ■ Over a decade on from *Doom 3*, id Software returns with yet another reboot of the seminal FPS franchise; designed to be bigger, bolder and more badass than anything that's come before it

Final thoughts on the multiplayer offering

What happens when nostalgia clashes violently against the design ethos of the modern first-person shooter? *Doom* happens, that's what. There's a lot to like about the series' return to its demonistic roots, but there's also some cause for concern – though there's clearly something here that's resonating with the general public. We know this to be true because a closed beta hosted thousands of space marines for one frantic weekend; it was an opportunity to engage in firefights with a rudimentary arsenal of Rocket Launchers and Super Shotguns, to do battle across rivers of fire and charge through the caverns of Hell like it was 1999 all over again. *Doom* is kinetic, immediate, and bloody as hell, but is it any fun?

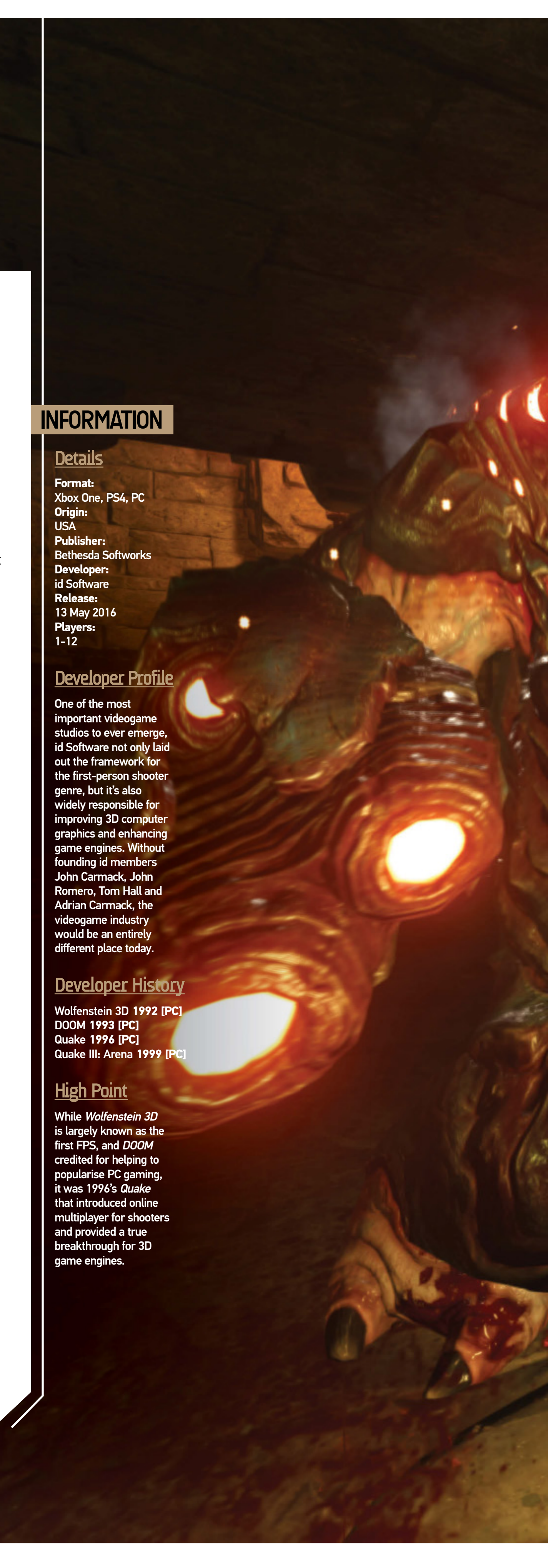
As ever, that's a difficult metric to judge from a beta. Because while id Software has crafted a wonderful homage to the year *Quake III: Arena* ruled supreme, *Doom* does have a tendency to feel like it's missing the mark by such a small margin. It rejoices in an era of the FPS that's long been restricted to the annals of Retro Gamer; jump pads, power-ups, health packs, speedy movement and crunchy Rocket Launcher battles delight, though the many elements it borrows from modern shooters seem misguided – if not misplaced entirely.

Doom – with its multiplayer offering, at least – tries to straddle the line between old and new by introducing elements that'll be familiar if you've touched an edition of *Call Of Duty* in the last decade. There's a loadout system that lets you customise your weapon sets with upgrades and unlocks, earned by levelling up in-between the ten-minute rounds. Everything you do in-game seems to be tied to a Challenge system, offering up extra EXP as a reward for doing anything from getting kills and assists to causing a certain amount of splash damage with the Rocket Launcher. Temporary 'Hacks' can be activated between deaths in a fashion not overtly dissimilar to *Titanfall*'s Burn Cards, giving you a brief window to boost your murderous efficiency against aggressors. These are systems that have come to define the modern FPS genre – they can work wonders in increasing the longevity and sustainability of certain games – though they feel a little out of place in an arena shooter.

That isn't (necessarily) because we are being slaves to nostalgia – whining because a developer dare attempt to update its franchise as opposed to setting it on a misty pedestal in the memories of stubborn, ageing gamers – but because the inclusion of these systems has ruptured classic elements out of the traditional game flow. *Quake III* had a thunderous rhythm to it, propelling action forwards by a wanton blood lust for power. In a situation where every player spawns in with the effectively ineffective Machine Gun, there's a rush towards the power weapons; respawn times creating roaming choke points as players desperately battle it out over the likes of the Rocket Launcher and Railgun for a brief window of superiority. But in *Doom*, every player is now able to spawn in with their own colourfully customised Launcher as standard; why would you want to grab anything else?

It makes the placement of the Gauss Cannon seem somewhat pointless – the only major power weapon pickup in the beta – as its only real application is to battle back against the hyper-powerful Revenant Demon. Giving players a loadout is a curious approach to an arena shooter, especially as health and armour pickups are still strewn across the map. The fact this doesn't so readily apply to weapons feels like a missed opportunity on id Software's part; having to duck out of firefights to hunt for a health boost can be just as tense as pulling the trigger, so it's a shame to see that there aren't the heart-in-mouth moments born from racing enemies towards tide-turning weapons too. And if you're thinking the application of that ancient design model has no place in modern gaming, *Unreal Tournament*'s strong return to form (even in its early alpha state) would have something to say to the contrary.

/// *Doom* is in something of a precarious position, then, because there's a lot to question in its design. The undeniable fact of the matter is, however, that *Doom* also happens to be



INFORMATION

Details

Format:
Xbox One, PS4, PC
Origin:
USA
Publisher:
Bethesda Softworks
Developer:
id Software
Release:
13 May 2016
Players:
1-12

Developer Profile

One of the most important videogame studios to ever emerge, id Software not only laid out the framework for the first-person shooter genre, but it's also widely responsible for improving 3D computer graphics and enhancing game engines. Without founding id members John Carmack, John Romero, Tom Hall and Adrian Carmack, the videogame industry would be an entirely different place today.

Developer History

Wolfenstein 3D **1992 [PC]**
DOOM **1993 [PC]**
Quake **1996 [PC]**
Quake III: Arena **1999 [PC]**

High Point

While *Wolfenstein 3D* is largely known as the first FPS, and *DOOM* credited for helping to popularise PC gaming, it was 1996's *Quake* that introduced online multiplayer for shooters and provided a true breakthrough for 3D game engines.



UNLEASH YOUR INNER DEMON

ONE OF THE most satisfying things you can do in new *Doom* is to embrace the darkness. At certain points on the map, a pentagram could be found and – after a quick, split-second ritual – you'd be transformed from a shotgun-toting space marine into a towering Revenant Demon. Jet-packing around the map as a near-unstoppable twin rocket-launcher wielding monster is as much ridiculous fun as you'd imagine it would be. Whoever holds the Demon power-up seems to be in a position of immense power, and its use has allowed for some incredibly dramatic comebacks. We're excited to see what other ritualistic power ups appear in the final release this May.

"You'll need to stay in constant motion to stay alive; every map is constructed to keep the action brutally fast-paced"

BETHESDA PRESS RELEASE

an absolute riot. The two game modes we've sampled so far – Team Deathmatch and objective-based Warpath – have proven to be intensely intimate affairs. 12 space marines battle it out in arenas constructed around a maze of tight, winding corridors; the short lines of sight demand the damage be dealt up close and personally. The larger open areas are a hotbed of vertical ledges and platforms; your skill over the double jump and mantle mechanics likely being the difference between life and a respawn screen, as is your ability to judge the trajectory of rockets before the plume of smoke emerges out of an enemy's launcher.

That's largely because there's very little reason to use any other weapon; the other items of mass disembodiment available to us in the beta felt weak, not just in terms of their lethality, but in terms of their tactile feedback too. To a certain degree, the studio could tweak the audio/visual cues of its weapons ahead of launch to at least give an illusion of power to the likes of the Lightning Gun and Vortex Rifle – though little can likely be done to mask the fact that *Doom* has transformed into a secret numbers game.

When we think about *Doom*, we get a specific image of how sacks of meat should visually respond to having a rocket aimed directly at them – and let us tell you, it isn't to see them bleed numbers. If we connect a bullet to a head, we expect to see blood and gore stain the steel walkways of Heatwave; if a rocket hits a body, we expect to see chunks of flesh rain down into the lava pits of Infernal – not to be informed that we've done '55' damage to an enemy. In a game like *Doom*, this is information that doesn't need to be visually conveyed to us; we don't care how much health an enemy has or had, only that a direct hit from a powerful weapon is rewarded with a gluttonous amount of gore. Numbers mean very little in a game defined by its speed and immediate, aggressive combat – the likes of *Doom*, *Quake* and *Unreal*

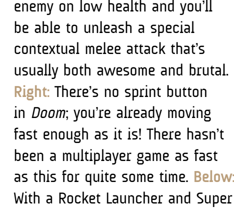
"There is no taking cover or stopping to regenerate health as you beat back Hell's raging demon hordes"

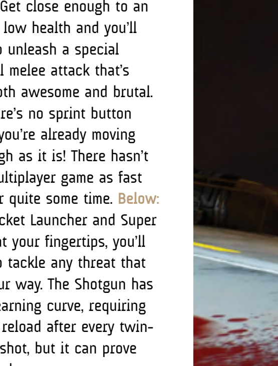
BETHESDA PRESS RELEASE

COLOUR CO-ORDINATION IS ALL THE RAGE IN HELL

DOOM IN 2016, despite being a game inherently focused on battling monster beasts in space stations and the hallowed hallways of Hell, seems awfully concerned with fashion and colour co-ordination. Levelling up doesn't just unlock new weapons and support items, it also gives you new armour sets and colouring options. It works in a similar fashion to customising your Spartan in *Halo 5: Guardians*, with the game allowing you to change specific components of your armour and drop custom patterns and colours onto your soldier to help you stand out on the battlefield. Honestly, it all feels a little out of place in a game like *Doom*. That said, we can't really begrudge the studio for wanting to bring the game into the future; as *Star Wars: Battlefront* demonstrated last year, being 'fun' simply isn't enough anymore.



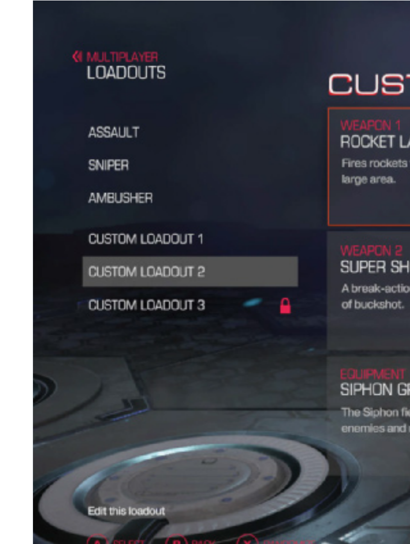


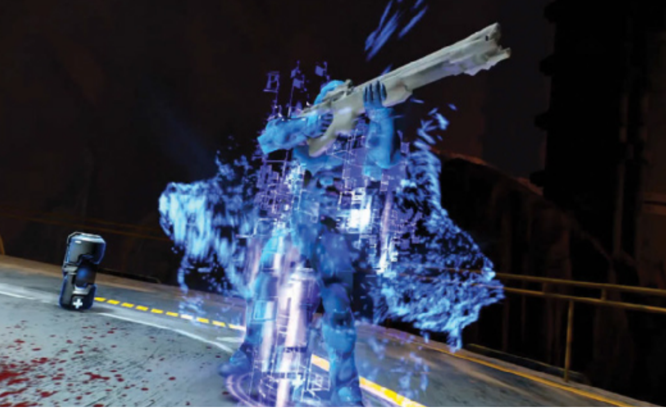


Above: Get close enough to an enemy on low health and you'll be able to unleash a special contextual melee attack that's usually both awesome and brutal. Right: There's no sprint button in *Doom*; you're already moving fast enough as it is! There hasn't been a multiplayer game as fast as this for quite some time. Below: With a Rocket Launcher and Super Shotgun at your fingertips, you'll be able to tackle any threat that comes your way. The Shotgun has a steep learning curve, requiring a lengthy reload after every twin-barrelled shot, but it can prove deadly at close range.



Above: The final build of *Doom* will feature nine multiplayer maps in total, taking the action from modestly-sized mining outposts to intensely symmetrical arenas forged in the depths of Hell itself. Expect brutal battles, and beware the environmental traps.







Tournament didn't solidify their legendary status by being overtly concerned with statistics.

It's perhaps this system that makes many of the weapons feel so woefully underpowered. If you zap an enemy with a Plasma or Lightning Rifle, only to be told that it does just '6' damage, it gives the impression that it's simply rubbish when compared to the Rocket Launcher or Super Shotgun. In *The Division* and *Destiny* the numbers help scale the combat for co-operative play, in *Borderlands* it's all tied back into a loot-based progression system; in *Doom* it simply feels like a superfluous addition to help drag the arena-gameplay kicking and screaming into the modern era. Compare this with, say, the new *Unreal Tournament*'s weapons and combat, and *Doom* seems to be without the lethal streak its closest competitor effortlessly exhibits.

/// *Doom* seems to be wrestling with two identities, unsure of which it would rather settle on. At times it feels like a breathtaking reinvention of the multiplayer arena-shooter, and at others it feels like it's trying too hard to be relevant. It doesn't help that *Overwatch* has arrived on the scene recently either; that's a game that seems to have effortlessly married the arena-shooter sensibilities that *Quake*, *Doom* and *UT* pioneered, with the fun, arcade-spirit of modern shooters. It makes many of *Doom*'s intentions seem misguided, with the game too often handling and acting like *Halo* in hell. Which is fun, but not what we're after.

But then again, there's no game in the world that carries the same unsettling, demonistic visual identity of *Doom*. Hitting a jump pad at speed, soaring over an enemy with a bunny-hop before eviscerating them with (a few hits of) the Super Shotgun from mid-air, before sprinting off in search of the next kill is wildly satisfying. While it's impossible for us to know how the meta of the game will change once people actually get good at it, motion seems to be less skill-based than you may be typically accustomed to in arena shooters. Environmental tricks and mastering your movement isn't the focus; that's been shifted to monitoring the momentum of players as you aim multiple rocket shots and obsessing over the intricacies of a chokepoint.

There's a lot to like in the *Doom* beta, though we're curious to see whether many of the elements that have raised an eyebrow make it into the main event, that awesome looking single-player campaign. We don't, after all, want to be shooting a Baron Of Hell for 35 damage with an oversized yet underpowered weapon of mass destruction; we want to be guaranteed a kill as we get up close to the monster, punch its heart straight out of its body, scoop it off of the ground and stuff it straight down its bloodied throat. That's the way *Doom* has been since 1993, and that's what we want now.

LEGO Star Wars: The Force Awakens

CONCEPT ■ The family friendly *LEGO* series takes on the latest in the *Star Wars* saga while seeking to innovate

Putting the new trilogy together one piece at a time

LEGO games feel like they are up there with death and taxes in the pantheon of "stuff that will happen", a fact that's hammered home at the beginning of our preview presentation as we are told it's been 11 years since the first *LEGO Star Wars* game. A lot has changed in the games industry in 11 years but it can sometimes feel like we're playing the same *LEGO* game over and over. This is something developers TT Fusion is acutely aware of and wants to change with *LEGO Star Wars: The Force Awakens.*

"We really want this to be the best *LEGO* game ever," says Tim Wileman, associate producer at TT Games, "Creating an authentic *LEGO Star Wars* game that stays faithful to the source material but at the same time is the freshest game in terms of new features and gameplay opportunities." For a series which has had the same 'press circle (other buttons are available) to solve puzzle' system for years now this is nice to hear. Enter the new Multi-Build system: rather than smashing *LEGO* bricks and being presented with a build which has been conceived by a games designer as the solution to their own puzzle, you are given up to three options of what to build. These might be used by yet-to-be unlocked characters or just to do something fun. "We've also got the customizer," Wileman elaborates. "So players can unlock characters, go to a special location in the hub pull them apart and put them back together in cool ways."

"It's about mirroring what kids do in real life," says Wileman. "Trying to replicate the tactility of LEGO and how kids interact with it." This has always been a core problem for the *LEGO* games – how do you keep the spirit of LEGO, while at the same time presenting a fun and linear game experience? "That's the holy grail and something I think with this game we've got closer than any of our previous games," Wileman says. But puzzle-solving isn't the only innovation *LEGO Star Wars: The Force Awakens* has: combat has updated systems as well, namely with Blaster Battles. These setpieces pop up during levels, and see the player facing down large enemy numbers from behind cover. Even flight combat has been given an overhaul: a combination of linear, sugar rush-like blasts of dogfighting and some open arena-like sections, which are particularly fun to play through.

Graphically *The Force Awaken*'s LEGO form is a treat, with a ton of extra details, jokes and references that *Star Wars* fans will love. Not only that, but key voices from the film – like Daisy Ridley as Rey – have recorded new lines for the game, while over 40 playable creatures and vehicles and over 200 unlockable characters join the film's roster. "We've included all the core characters from *Episode VII*," Wileman explains. "So you've got Kylo Ren, Captain Phasma (and everyone else) – the team has really gone to town bringing them to life in terms of how they are animated and how they control. We've also borrowed heavily from *Episodes I-VI* and a few other side stories that will come as a pleasant surprise to *Star Wars* fans." It's these side stories that perhaps hold some of the most interesting elements for a *Star Wars* fan.

> "It's the freshest game in terms of new features and new gameplay opportunities"
>
> TIM WILEMAN TT GAMES

"These stories take place leading up to *Episode VII*," Wileman says. "Working closely with Lucasfilm has helped shape these levels – like 'How did Lor San Tekka get to Jakku?' That's not going to be something that's going to play out in theatres." That's not all though, as Wileman explains: "Some of it's going to be stuff that only really seasoned *Star Wars* fans are going to go 'Oh! That's that!' – and that's really cool." All of this points to a bigger, more innovative *LEGO* game than we have seen before; the ultimate package for *Star Wars* fans new and old, and a genuine step forward for the 11-year-old series. Frankly, it's about time.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, Xbox One, Wii U, PC, 3DS, PSVita, Xbox 360, PS3
Origin: UK
Publisher: Warner Brothers Interactive Entertainment
Developer: TT Fusion
Release: 28 June 2016
Players: 2

Developer Profile

TT Fusion has been developing *LEGO* games since 2007 when it was acquired by TT Games. Its first title was *LEGO Star Wars: The Complete Saga* and it went on to create some of the most beloved *LEGO* titles like *LEGO Harry Potter: Years 1-4* and *LEGO Lord Of The Rings.*

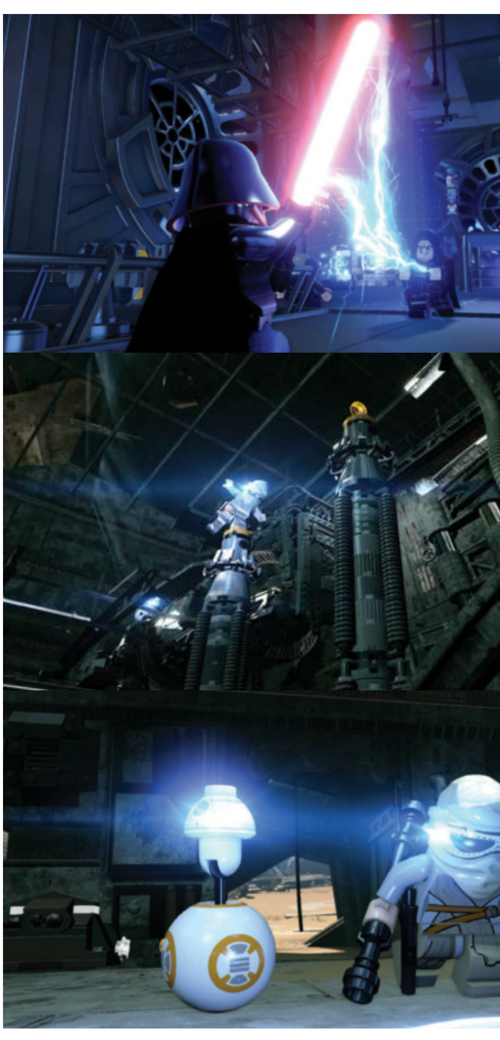
Developer History

LEGO Star Wars: The Complete Sage **Xbox 360/PS3/Wii/PC [2007]**
LEGO Harry Potter: Years 1-4 **Xbox 360/ PS3/Wii [2010]**
LEGO Lord of the Rings **Xbox 360/PS3/Wii [2012]**
LEGO City Undercover **Wii U [2013]**

High Point

LEGO Lord of the Rings is still one of the most immersive worlds TT Fusion has created and still has some of the biggest battles seen in a *LEGO* game.





■ Right: Each character plays differently, with Rey acting as an athletic character and Finn going for the brute force approach, for example.

HUB WORLDS

LEGO games have made increasingly better use of their hub worlds in order to drag you deeper in to the world they are trying to create. *LEGO Marvel Superheroes* had its recreation of Manhattan and *LEGO Lord Of The Rings* had amazing sections of Middle-earth. TT Fusion is building on this with *LEGO Star Wars: The Force Awakens*. There are a total of five hubs in this game, which will have you exploring Jakku, Takodana, Star Killer Base, D'Qar and the interior of the Millennium Falcon. These spaces will be packed with familiar sights, sounds and characters that fans of *Star Wars* will love and from a gameplay standpoint there will be all sorts of hidden collectibles.

Left: Classic characters from across the series will all play differently thanks to TT Fusions commitment to the details. This, combined with the Multi-Build system will only enhance the replayability that is key to the *LEGO* series. Below: Creativity is a key component in *LEGO Star Wars: The Force Awakens* and something we're glad to see more of.



“We have so much content planned for the base game so we can’t wait to share that with players”

JESSE RAPCZAK, CO-FOUNDER AND CO-CREATIVE

Ark: Survival Evolved

Above: Much like *Far Cry Primal*, you can tame practically every beast on the map and bend them to your will (including the woolly mammoth, Giganotosaurus and Tyrannosaurus). Tamed beasts can be used for everything from hunting to gathering resources.

CONCEPT Forage, build a base and aim to survive in a lush world populated by bloodthirsty dinosaurs that want to feast on your stranded form.

The dino action-RPG prepares to go full prehistoric this summer

Embroiled in a legal battle its developers may be, but *Ark: Survival Evolved* is still preparing to roll out in its finished form on Xbox One in the summer. The game arrived on Microsoft’s Xbox Preview Program back in December and has proved a popular, if buggy, hit. Alongside the current 26 dinosaurs, the developers have been happily adding in plenty of new creatures that can be tamed and used as mounts, including the beaver-like Castoroides Feliconcisors, which offers the best wood-gathering attribute on the map (making it ideal for the build-your-own-base-out-of-wood goal).

Prehistoric beavers aren’t the only new tenants coming to the survival sim either. Studio Wildcard has also been teasing another fresh dino addition to the jungle, although this one has a decidedly more *Horizon: Zero Dawn* feel about it: a robot dinosaur is coming to Ark. The monstrosity in question will be a mechanised version of the Giganotosaurus, which we’re told won’t be that fast should you meet it out in the wilds, but it will be fairly weighty so don’t expect to walk away unharmed if it steps on you. The developer has also teased some more robotic additions, but it’s keeping quiet for now on which beasts will be getting a robot makeover.

‘Tribes’ is another key feature coming to the Xbox One version. The tribal system offers an *EVE: Online*-style group setup, enabling players to form large social groups with their own rules, territory and forms of government. In MMO terms, think of it like a grand guild where players can join and contribute to a larger community. It’s a nice touch and one that might appeal to newer adopters feeling a little intimidated by the intense survival aspects.

However, it’s not all good news; *Ark* has been known for its fair share of bugs since it debuted on Xbox Game Preview in December. The pressure is on for Studio Wildcard to tidy its code up before release, which so far has included removing a notorious map glitch, where parts of the map were causing everything from bases to dinos and players to fall through the map to another layer below. While game-breaking for some, other more opportunistic players were using this fault to bypass the defences of other players and access their bases from within.

Studio Wildcard has even launched a host of new servers specifically for Xbox One, which should hopefully give the finished article a much sturdier foundation when it’s rolled out in June. So after a bit of a bumpy ride in the Early Access and Preview stages, it looks like *Ark* is finally ready to shake off those prehistoric cobwebs.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox One, PS4, PC
Origin: United States
Publisher: Studio Wildcard
Developer: Studio Wildcard, Instinct Games, Virtual Basement, Efecto Studios
Release: June
Players: 1-70 (per server)

Developer Profile

Based in the state of Washington, developer Wildcard Studios is a relatively new outfit having been formed a mere two years ago by a number of veteran devs including co-founder Jesse Rapczak, a former technical art director at Microsoft Game Studios. *Ark: Survival Evolved* is the studio’s first game.

Developer History

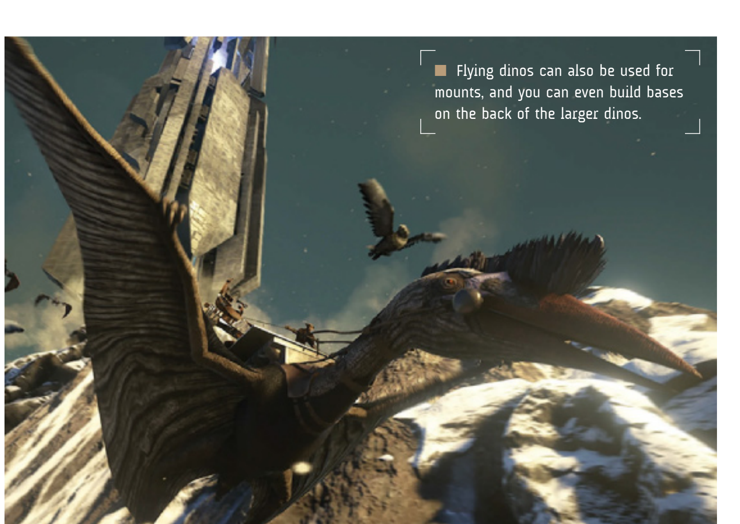
Ark: Survival Evolved, **2016 [PC, PS4, Xbox One]**

High Point

This being Studio Wildcard’s first game, it’s not surprising to find *Ark: Survival Evolved* as the developer’s only highlight. However, it’s proved a huge hit with fans with a consistent position in the top ten most streamed games on Twitch.



Above: Yes, a giant beaver may smack of Pokémon-level silliness but it’s easily one of the most useful creatures in Ark.



Flying dinos can also be used for mounts, and you can even build bases on the back of the larger dinos.

"The Solus Project is a work of love for us, two independent teams set out to build their dream game"
JAKUB MIKYSKA CEO OF GRIP DIGITAL

The Solus Project

CONCEPT *The Solus Project* arrives on Steam Early Access and Xbox One's Game Preview programme as a showcase of Teotl Studios and GRIP Digital's effort to create a sci-fi survival simulator.

Fighting for survival in a foreign land

There's something rather clever about the way in which a survival game can twist expectation. Take *The Solus Project*, a game that wastes no time in dumping you on a hostile alien planet with little more to interact with than a deliberately obtuse PDA and a vague indication of an objective: survive or die trying. But we don't question the lack of direction or assistance; instead, we get straight to work.

Haphazardly spelunking through caves, carelessly drinking from questionable water sources, and fiddling with foreign technology in an effort to find out more information about Sarah and her cosmonaut canines. Apparently all useful documentation and supplies relating to off-world survival were destroyed in the crash, thankfully the diaries of your crew landed perfectly intact.

The Solus Project could be lazily described as *The Martian: The Videogame*, albeit one without the presence of Matt Damon. Or Mars. It isn't directly like *The Martian*, then, but it *does* evokes a similar sense of crippling isolation. The fear of dying all alone – with the continuation of the human race placed on your weary shoulders – is a powerful motivational tool, and it's used to great effect in *The Solus Project*.

You might succumb to hypothermia in the harsh alien rains, far from shelter after an experiment with teleportation disks goes awry. Perhaps you'll be dragged below the surface by violent waves, the reflection of the multi-mooned sky your final view before a fade to black. Or maybe, just maybe, you'll find yourself starving to death because you couldn't fashion a makeshift tin opener from one rock and another slightly sharper rock. *The Solus Project* is a brutal survival adventure; you'll spend as much of your time wrestling with the realities of self-preservation in an unfinished game, as you will a desire to progress through this gorgeous Unreal Engine 4-powered world.

The Solus Project has made a solid debut as part of the Xbox One's Game Preview programme, though there's still a long way to go before it could be considered content complete. Essential tutorials are MIA, there are mechanics too mysterious to follow, and the frame-rate desperately needs optimisation. But that's okay; we knew what we were getting into by playing a survival game still in the early stages of development. What's important is that the potential is certainly there for *The Solus Project* to weave a compelling narrative, both environmentally and perhaps in a larger, story-telling sense, and the desire to survive is cultivated well. It's a difficult game, but whoever said the act of self-preservation in a terrifyingly bleak world would be easy?

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox One, PC
Origin: Sweden/Czech Republic
Publisher: Teotl Studios/GRIP Digital
Developer: In-house
Release: June 2016
Players: 1

Developer Profile

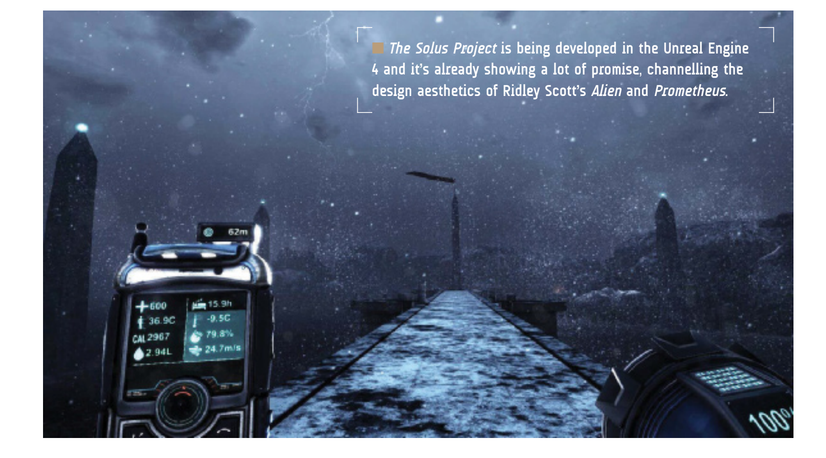
Following its work on *Unmechanical* in 2012, Teotl Studios joined forces with GRIP Digital to developer its first Unreal Engine 4 game, *The Solus Project*. The studios have collaborated in the past, with the latter team brought in to finalise the *Unmechanical: Extended* port to next-gen consoles last year.

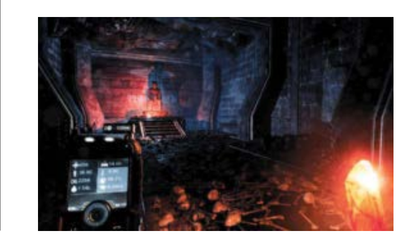
Developer History

The Ball **2010 [PC]**
One Epic Game **2011 [PS3]**
Atomic Ninjas **2013 [PS3]**
Unmechanical: Extended **2015 [Multi]**

High Point

Unmechanical: Extended proved to be a fairly robust puzzle game when it launched on current-gen consoles last year, and walked a fine line between accessibility and head-scratching challenge.


The Solus Project is being developed in the Unreal Engine 4 and it's already showing a lot of promise, channelling the design aesthetics of Ridley Scott's *Alien* and *Prometheus*.





Above: Deck 13's vision of the future is distinctly dystopian, the tone set by the liberal use of shadow and low-angle perspectives across the core imagery.



The Surge

CONCEPT Tough-as-nails action RPG set in a future in which giant conglomerates and the artificial intelligence they've created are out to rule the world

First day on the job, and robots are out to kill you

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC
Origin: Germany
Publisher: Focus Home Interactive
Developer: Deck 13
Release: 2017
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Based in Frankfurt, Germany, Deck 13 built its reputation on adventure games featuring a slice of action on the side. Over the years its focus has changed to include action as a priority, with the studio's most recent release, *Lords Of The Fallen*, representing this trend best of all.

Developer History

Lords of the Fallen **2014 [Multi]**
Blood Knights **2013 [Multi]**
Jack Keane **2007 [PC]**
Ankh **2005 [PC]**

High Point

Despite often being classified as an attempt to clone *Dark Souls*, gloomily-lit RPG *Lords Of The Fallen* represented a significant step up for Deck 13 in terms of scale and ambition of content.

Breaking into the hardcore action-RPG space dominated by From Software's *Bloodborne* and *Dark Souls* series isn't going to be an easy task. If your own attempt at a brutally challenging, yet deeply satisfying, adventure isn't at least in the same ballpark of combat and mechanical quality then your chances of success are all but extinguished. Some means of capturing an audience are more assured than others, however. Opting for a drastically different setting and aesthetic is one of them.

Deck 13, creators of *Lords Of The Fallen* – certainly inspired by *Dark Souls*, though without the intense difficulty – is adding a touch of sci-fi to a genre that has otherwise stuck rigidly to portraying dark fantasy dominions. *The Surge* is positioned in a future in which the more controversial elements of today's society have evolved to their most negative potential ends. Natural resources have been nearly completely extinguished; artificial intelligence is taking more jobs and undermining what it means to be human; a small number of giant conglomerates are determining political and social progress.

Our hero within this dystopian vision of our own future is one of the lucky ones. He has a job. Unlucky for him, and for us, his first day at work has coincided with all robots launching into a killing spree. Our hero's employer deals in robots; their properties are loaded with them. And, thus, our reason for engaging in combat emblematic of *Dark Souls* and *Lords Of The Fallen* is provided, and in an environment rich with possibility. Scavenging industrial equipment – chainsaws, plasma cutters etc – to use as weapons, it falls to the trainee to find out what has happened and how to calm the aggression of machines gone rogue.

The major melee element that separates this from Deck 13's previous release is the inclusion of a limb targeting system that allows you to concentrate your efforts on specific arms and legs. You might want to cut off a leg to slow down a fleet-footed opponent, or nullify their attacking potential by removing an arm holding a weapon. Any decision must be weighed against their allowance of armour and where it's positioned; it might be tempting to remove their ability to hurt you, but if their shoulders are covered in armour, that's something of a tall order. Swift analysis is required.

Enemies range from giant crab-like machines used to transport large cargo to drones manning warehouses, and it's likely going to be in the diversity offered by these different entities upon which the *The Surge* ultimately lives or dies. Drawing your audience into your world is one thing, keeping them there is another. It's our guy's first day on the job, after all, it would be a shame if it's not worth us sticking around beyond their probation.

> "The events in our game are very over-the-top, but we want to get you thinking that this is a reality that's not so far away from our own"
> JAN KLOSE, DECK 13



Above: Hardship prevails in *Vampyr*'s vision of London, Britain struggling to find the resources required to maintain the city following the end of World War One.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC
Origin: France
Publisher: Focus Home Interactive
Developer: Dontnod
Release: 2017
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Based in Paris, Dontnod has created a strong reputation off of the back of only two releases. *Life Is Strange* was near-universally praised for its telling of a story about a troubled teenage girl, whereas *Remember Me*, despite its questionable combat mechanics, provided a vividly drawn world to explore.

Developer History

Life Is Strange
2015 [Multi]

Remember Me
2013 [Multi]

High Point

Without question, *Life Is Strange* represents Dontnod's crowning glory at this point in the studio's young life. The game's emotional underpinnings struck a chord with many, making it one of the highlights of 2015.

Vampyr

CONCEPT ■ As a vampire you must decide how to live your life under the knowledge that you need blood to survive. Do you kill or not?

It's still pronounced 'vampire'

For a studio that has released only two games, Dontnod's reputation is unusually high. Last year's *Life Is Strange* proved that the Parisian team has the talent to create intrigue through a reliance on writing over action and built on the obvious potential demonstrated through its debut *Remember Me*. With great reputation, comes great responsibility, however. Let down your fans and you'll eventually have none. Its latest project, *Vampyr*, is the first in which lofty standards are expected rather than hoped for.

London, 1918. The city struggles to maintain its health and sanity following the end of World War One. Those that can't, try to look after themselves, not least the families of soldiers returning or dead, live in desperate poverty and cling only to hope to get by. In this environment the vampire flourishes, feeding on those that the authorities can't protect.

You play Jonathan Reid, a military veteran that has been forcibly turned into a vampire through events that are at this point unknown. A morally steadfast man (while human), Reid is torn between leading a just life and satisfying his biological need for human blood. How he acts is down to you, with your decisions – we're promised – working to influence the fate of London as a whole. The more blood you consume the more powers you can unlock and use, although you pay for it by sending the boroughs you feed from into prisons of fear and dismay. Kill too many people in the Whitechapel district, for instance, and those there might even begin to murder one another out of a fresh suspicion that warps their view of how to protect themselves and their families. Don't kill and peace is easier to introduce, but your strength will suffer and your combat ability will weaken.

Above: Other vampires exist in Dontnod's vision of 1918 London, but their stories and desires are not yet known.



"We created the world and the 'unbalanced' character at the same time. We want them to match one another"
STEPHANE BEAUVERGER, DONTNOD

Admittedly, we've seen only a small slice of what looks to be a significant world. However, at this point, combat is without question the weakest element. A third-person system asks you to rely on a mixture of combos and special powers to dispatch of vigilante vampire hunters and groups of what Dontnod is calling 'lesser vampires'. Given the intrigue generated through the decisions and moral ambiguities that you must personally wrangle with as a vampire with a conscience, the existence of such a predictable and derivative approach to action is disappointing.

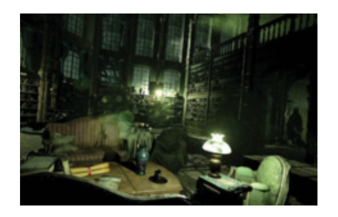
We've seen this kind of combat in third-person games before, too often, and *Vampyr* looks as though it's doing nothing to progress our knowledge or appreciation of it. If Dontnod is going to retain its hard earned reputation then all areas of all future releases are going to have to impress.

SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

CALL OF CTHULU

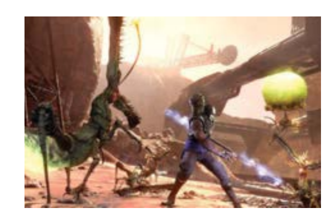
Format: PC
Publisher: Focus Home Interactive
Developer: Cyanide Studios
ETA: 2017



ORIGINALLY ANNOUNCED back in 2014 with some conceptual art, Focus Home Interactive's *Call Of Cthulu* reboot of sorts quickly went dark, before resurfacing in February of this year with Cyanide Studios at the helm instead of original developer Frogwares. Based on the long-running pen and paper RPG of the same name, *Cthulu* lifts from HP Lovecraft's terror tale of the same name, and promises plenty of chills when it hits PC next year.

THE TECHNOMANCER

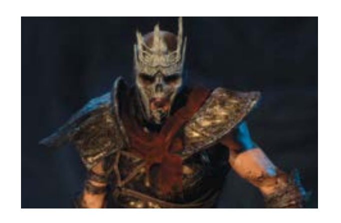
Format: PS4, PC, Xbox One
Publisher: Focus Home Interactive
Developer: Spider Games
ETA: Q4 2016



SPIDER GAMES' *Bound By Flame* was rather hit and miss at the best of times, so it's no surprise that the developer is stepping away from swords and sorcery with *The Technomancer*, a futuristic RPG set in a post apocalyptic world decimated by an event known as the War of Water. With a narrative that unfurls on Mars and some slick combat mechanics, we're expecting interesting things from Spider's second stab at a current-gen RPG.

INNER CHAINS

Format: PC
Publisher: Telepaths' Tree
Developer: In-house
ETA: Q4 2016



INNER CHAINS looks rather good, so good in fact that in order to deliver on the promise of these gorgeous bio-mechanical visuals, developer Telepaths' Tree was in need of $10,000 on Kickstarter to ensure the game is completed. Crafted by a handful of geniuses behind the likes of *Gears Of War* and *Dying Light*, Inner Chains sees you exploring a mysterious world and its dangers born as a result of the Giger-inspired environment. Count us in.

WARTILE

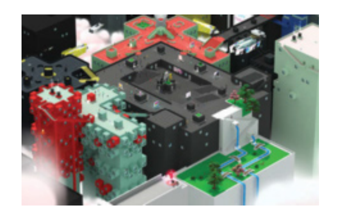
Format: PC
Publisher: Playwood Project Aps
Developer: In-house
ETA: Q3 2016



WARTILE ISN'T the first game to try and bring tabletop gaming to the realm of video games, but it sure does look pretty. Brandishing turn-based tactics and a dash of elements snagged form RTS games, *Wartile* tasks you with leading an army of slickly designed figurines into scuffles on miniature battle boards. Each board comes stacked with numerous quests, secrets and achievements, which means there's plenty of replay value to be had here.

TOKYO 42

Format: TBC
Publisher: Mode7
Developer: Smac Games
ETA: TBC 2017



INSPIRED BY *Grand Theft Auto* and *Syndicate*, this is one of the most promising action indies we've seen in a long while. *Tokyo 42* sees you play as an assassin in an open-world single-player campaign in some gorgeously detailed isometric landscapes (that can be rotated for a better view, we should add). It will also feature a competitive multiplayer experience that promises to be insanely paced and gadget-laden.

DRAGON OF LEGENDS

Format: PC, Mac, iOS, Android
Publisher: Thrive Games
Developer: In-house
ETA: Q3 2016



CURRENTLY LURKING about on Kickstarter and set for a multi-platform release later in the year, *Dragon Of Legends* is an ARPG set in the world of Gaelic and Norse mythology that promises real-time combat mechanics and quests inspired by the rich lore. Interestingly, Thrive Games is promising to deliver on a toolset that will allow fans to submit artwork that can then be voted into the game by other players.

DELIVER US TO THE MOON

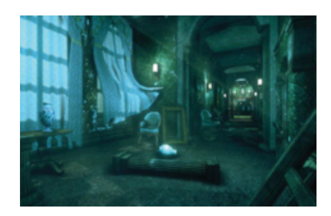
Format: PC, Mac, Linux
Publisher: KeokeN Interactive
Developer: In-house
ETA: Q3 2016



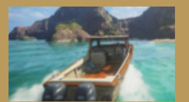
DELIVER US To The Moon tasks with travelling to the moon to save humanity, but you won't be alone – you'll have company in the form of a helpful droid by the name of ASE. The little fella's been programmed to help you solve puzzles and explore the moon's more hazardous terrain. Sure, it looks nice, but we're not sold on the idea of the moon as humankind's last hope. Let's hope there's a twist in there somewhere.

KAIDAN

Format: PC
Publisher: Metanoia Games
Developer: In-house
ETA: Q4 2016

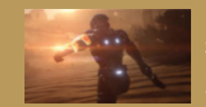


ENJOY SCARING the bejesus out of people? You're going to love *Kaidan*. Billed as an asymmetric multiplayer survival horror cum RPG, *Kaidan* apparently allows you to tell a series of spooky fables while having other players take part. Oh, and you get to be the villain of the story, too. While the screens look pretty, we're still none the wiser as to how we're expected to play this one, but consider our interest piqued.



DELAYED – Uncharted 4: A Thief's End

It feels like we've only just reported on the fact that *Uncharted 4* has been delayed. Well, it's been delayed again, but thankfully it's only for two weeks to ensure extra manufacturing time and a smooth global launch.

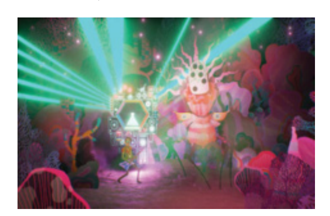


DELAYED – Mass Effect Andromeda

The new *Mass Effect* has been kicked into next year. We've waited long enough already for it after it was unveiled at 2015's E3, so what's another year between friends, right?

THE ARTFUL ESCAPE OF FRANCIS VENDETTI

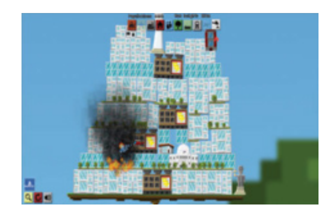
Format: **PC, Mac**
Publisher: **Beethoven & Dinosaur**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q4 2016**



THE ARTFUL Escape of Francis Vendetti isn't just a platformer; it's also a music-sampling, mountain climbing, rhythm-based game that's as colourful as it is bonkers. Oh, and according to the Oz-based developer it's weird worlds are inspired by none other than the late, great David Bowie. From what we've seen it looks absolutely fantastic and we expect this one to turn many a head when it arrives later in 2016.

BALANCITY

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **FerCrodoba**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q2 2016**



BALANCITY IS a weird and wonderful blend of *Sim City* and Jenga that sees you attempting to build and balance an entire city on a pivot, while trying to craft the tallest city possible before the whole damn thing comes crumbling down on you. It's simple, it's effective and it's addictive. Even though it's only in beta right now, we expect things to move forward on this one after the developer earmarked a mid-2016 release for the full game.

NAKITI GENERATIONS

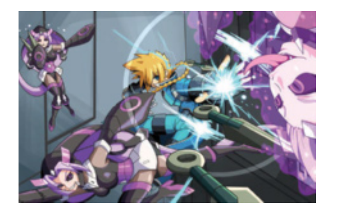
Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Diablohead**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q3 2016**



SET IN the year 2120, *Nakiti Generations* stars an unnamed heroine caught up in a huge disaster aboard a massive space station after it crash-lands on an uncharted world. The goal is simple: explore the weird and wonderful planet, metroidvania style. Right now the game is currently on Steam Greenlight and Kickstarter, and it's already passed its funding goal, so expect this to shift to a multiplatform release off the back of that.

AZURE STRIKER GUNVOLT 2

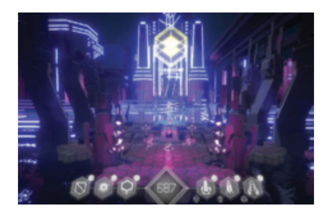
Format: **Nintendo 3DS**
Publisher: **Nintendo**
Developer: **Inti Creates**
ETA: **Q3 2016**



ANNOUNCED AT Nintendo's recent Direct conference, *Azure Striker Gunvolt 2* is the sequel to the 2014 action platformer from developer Inti Creates. The action picks up right where the second one left off with Gunvolt pulled back into the battlefield once more to confront a new foe. He'll have a little help with a new playable character called Copen, his rival from the first game. Inti is promising a summer release for this one.

FAILURE

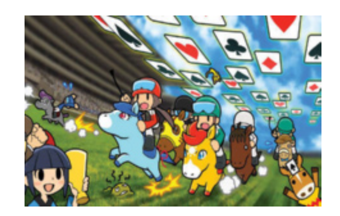
Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Dream Harvest Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2017**



FAILURE IS attempting to combine elements from a raft of different genres, including RTS, CCG, god sim, and tower defence titles, while also trying to juggle both a narrative-driven single-player experience and persistent multiplayer. Sounds like quite a lot of plates to keep spinning if you ask us, but it's looking extremely stylish, plus the team behind it claims to have a combined 25 years experience going for it, so let's hope for a happy ending.

POCKET CARD JOCKEY

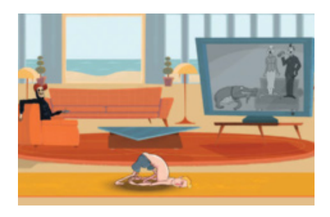
Format: **Nintendo 3DS**
Publisher: **Nintendo**
Developer: **Game Freak**
ETA: **May 2016**



HITTING THE eShop in May is one of Game Freak's more curious-looking titles, the goofy *Pocket Card Jockey*. Originally called *Soliti Horse*, but retitled *Pocket Card Jockey* for its UK release, the game combines Solitaire and, well, horse racing. An odd combo, but we can't help but find ourselves weirdly intrigued at the prospect of winning at Solitaire in order for our horse to race faster towards the finish line.

MANUAL SAMUEL

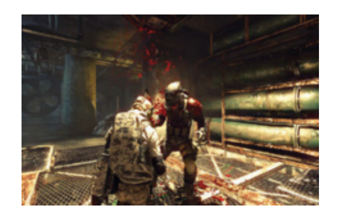
Format: **Xbox One, PS4, PC**
Publisher: **Curve Digital**
Developer: **Perfectly ParaNormal**
ETA: **Q2 2016**



MEET SAMUEL, a perfectly normal chap with a girlfriend and good health. Then he's killed, and after a meeting with Death himself, forced to navigate normal life performing everything manually. That includes breathing in and out, moving his left and his right leg, or just going to the toilet. You, the player, will control all that in this rollicking indie giggler that owes more than its fair share of debt to the humour of the *Monkey Island* series.

UMBRELLA CORPS

Format: **PS4, PC, Xbox One**
Publisher: **Capcom**
Developer: **Capcom**
ETA: **May 2016**



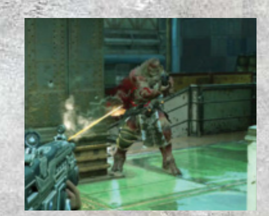
THE LAST time Capcom attempted to develop a third person multiplayer shooter in the *Resident Evil* universe it stank like a decade-old corpse. The Japanese publisher is attempting to rectify that with *Umbrella Corps*, a competitive shooter with multiplayer modes and maps culled from the likes of *RE4* and *RE5*. There's a single player campaign in here too, but it's essentially a series of horde-based missions.


GEARS
4



THE WIND OF CHANGE

We speak exclusively with The Coalition's Rod Fergusson and Chuck Osieja as the Gears Of War 4 beta rolls out on Xbox One



■ The Swarm replace the Locust as the monster faction for online multiplayer, but there are actually two others to choose from. It appears *Gears Of War 4* includes the COG and Outsiders as separate groups too.



“When we first came in, we talked about the Tim Burton *Batman* and the Christopher Nolan *Batman*,” Rod Fergusson tells us as we talk ahead of the launch of the *Gears Of War 4* beta. “When I first came in that was one of our things: ‘We’re going to be Christopher Nolan’s *Batman*’. But as we started doing it we realised ‘This just isn’t *Gears*. This is something else’. So we’re trying to find this middle ground when you hear the banter, even in our tease at E3, with Kait and JD talking to each other. I don’t want to make a humourless game.”

The Coalition’s studio head comes back to this again and again in our time with him: making sure *Gears Of War 4* is evolving, but staying true to the core values of what a *Gears* game is. As the head of a relatively unknown team, albeit staffed by experienced developers and a smattering of former Epic-employees (just like himself), finding the right way to do a *Gears* game on Xbox One was the first and most important challenge. The Coalition, formerly Black Tusk Studios, has yet to release a game for Microsoft, so it’s understandable that it would want to make its mark with its first game, but when that game is a sequel to one of the biggest franchises in the industry you have to tread carefully.

“The focus of the studio was to do it right before we do it different,” explains Chuck Osieja, creative director at The Coalition. “*Gears* to me, when you really start to dissect it and understand it, it’s a deceptively simple experience. You just get into cover and you shoot, but the way cover is set up – engagement distances, the roles the enemies play, the roles that weapons play, the way those things work together, the synergy is so amazing – it makes this really compelling, really elegant experience. If you don’t understand how those things work you can screw it up. In fact that’s probably why we haven’t seen another cover-based shooter that’s of the same quality as *Gears*, because it’s really, really hard to do.”

And the effort to keep this new *Gears* experience as close to that of the original stands out when you play the game. We played through three new maps for *Gears 4* that everyone will be enjoying as part of the beta on Xbox One and like slipping on a pair of old trainers, it was a perfect fit. Those small details that Osieja stresses, the speed of the running, the fire rates, the frames it takes to slam into cover, all add up to make this game feel like nothing else. It can leave you with the sense that not a huge amount has been done to update the game, but in actuality pulling this off has actually taken a lot of effort.

“We built technology that allowed us to take actual stuff like movement of the characters or the weapons and all the data that was coming from *Gears 3* and Unreal Engine 3 and paste it on top of what we were building in Unreal Engine 4 and be able to do pixel-to-pixel comparisons,” he continues. “So what you’re seeing with the Lancer is exactly the way the Lancer behaved at the starting point of *Gears 3*. The way the characters moved in terms of distance and speed and the animations is all exactly the same. We started with *Gears 3* as a basis in Unreal Engine 4, which was really critical for us to be able to get to where we’ve gotten to now because the changes we were able to make after that were done on a solid foundation versus us saying ‘It *kind* of feels right…’

It’s important to note at this point that the move onto Unreal Engine 4 didn’t exactly make producing *Gears Of War 4* any easier. The code for Epic’s previous games wasn’t

“We were afraid that if we tried to do things that were too revolutionary we would be judged harshly”

■ Working as a tight team is still the best way to achieve victory in online play. In Dodgeball it can mean the difference between being wiped out fast and staging an amazing comeback.

compatible with the new engine. AI scripts, for instance, could not be translated to the new platform and as Osieja has described, what almost seems like a ghosting process was used to match original animations with new content being generated for this generation. It was a meticulous process and one greatly assisted by having helped build the *Gears Of War: Ultimate Edition*.

"It was totally a training bootcamp for the team," says Fergusson. "Having them go in and reverse engineer it and understand it became a huge learning experience for us as we began thinking about how to do *Gears 4*." The team were digging into the original game and then recreating it, piece by piece. "For us it was like going to school on how to build a cover-based shooter. It was a really great experience," adds Osieja. And it was an experience that lead to some interesting discoveries, even for Fergusson who had worked on the original *Gears* trilogy at Epic.

"One of the things that was interesting was that *Gears 1*, *2* and *3* really grew organically and I wasn't as much a part of that as Lee Perry and Cliff Bleszinski," he reveals. "Lee was really all about the creature design – and a lot of things at the time, at least from my perspective, naturally happened. The Ticker from *Gears Of War 2* just naturally happened, the Mauler with the shield, one day Lee was like, 'You know, if you give this guy a shield he looks really cool'. It didn't feel at the time like there was a thorough process by which the designs were happening."

But he credits The Coalition's lead multiplayer designer Ryan Cleven with discovering one of those deceptively simple tricks Perry and Bleszinski used to make *Gears* what it is. "He explained that there are the mirrors, the guys who act like you do and who can do what you do like Drones. Then there's the pinners; if you think of a turret or the Grinder with the chain gun, he's pinning you into cover. Then you look at the Wretch and the Ticker, those are flushers who get you out of cover and make you vulnerable again. So, if you look at mirrors, pinners and flushers you can pretty much put every enemy in *Gears Of War* into one of those buckets and that's the way we need to think about it. We thought that was really smart, because when we first started we think, 'Oh, fictionally this is a really fun or interesting enemy', but then we'd ask, that crazy idea for an enemy, is it a mirror, pinner or flusher? And then we would need to tailor the design to one of those. For me, thinking about it systematically like that instead or organically asking, 'What's a cool idea?', that changed a lot about how we thought about *Gears*."

The Coalition needed to learn lessons like this fast. It was only back in January 2014 that Microsoft bought the rights to *Gears Of War* from Epic Games and the Vancouver, Canada team was immediately put to work on a sequel and a remaster of the original Xbox 360 release. While this tandem production has clearly had its benefits, it also put the team under a lot of time pressure and just as it didn't want to upset fans by changing too much, The Coalition was also limited in what it could achieve in the window it's been given. "One of the things that you realise, you only really have time to make one really big tech investment," Fergusson tells us. "So,

THE CLASS OF 2016

Introducing the new heroes of the Gears series



KAIT DIAZ
A member of the Outsiders, a separatist group that rejects the rule of the Coalition of Ordered Governments. Her parents were the leaders of the group prior to her father's death. She becomes friends with JD and Del after they run away from the COG army.

DELMONT WALKER
JD's best friend and fellow COG soldier, now on the run from the authorities and hiding out with the Outsiders. Del is an orphan, having lost his parents before he met JD at boarding school. They ran away together to join the militia before the classified incident that sent them running.

JD FENIX
The son of Marcus Fenix, born after the events of the Locust Wars. JD joined the COG Militia out of boarding school where he met his best friend Delmont Walker, but went AWOL after a classified incident and sought refuge with a new group called The Outsiders.

The *Gears 4* beta launches 18 April for those who bought the *Gears Of War: Ultimate Edition*, followed by a wider Xbox Live Gold beta beginning 25 April. The finished game launches 11 October 2016.

"Gears to me, when you really start to dissect it and understand it, it's a deceptively simple experience"



The Dropshot was easily our favourite special weapon in the multiplayer matches we played. It takes a little skill to use well, but the results can be spectacular.

we were like, 'What's it going to be? Do we want to focus on water? Do we want to focus on all these different things?'. We were talking about different ideas and we hadn't landed on it, but I kept going back to the wind.

"There was a brief mission in *Judgment* that had a huge windstorm, but it was really more about obscuring your vision than it was about gameplay mechanics. There was something about that that really resonated, though, so we started to build on that and finally I said, 'I think wind is the right thing for us, so let's go and prototype it'. To my mind there were certain ways we could do it, but the team just took it on and turned it into a full-blown system now where in any environment we can go and say 'There's a wind flare, that's a category three coming from the right', and all the foliage will move in the right way, your character will animate to it, you hear it differently depending on how you face the wind or whether you're in a 'wind shadow' and a piece of cover is blocking the wind. All of that stuff is built into the campaign so that it's not just one scripted moment. It's a full-on system."

If you've seen any of the single-player gameplay revealed so far then some of what *Gears Of War 4*'s Wind Flares can do will already be clear to you. They're a result of the Imulsion Countermeasure weapon in *Gears 3* and will have a massive impact on your surrounding environment in the game. It's a stunning addition to the franchise visually and is a great example of The Coalition's evolutionary approach to the series.

"It changes how you play the game, but doesn't change the gameplay," adds Osieja. "Rod's got a great saying, he says '*Gears* doesn't do anything regularly, it turns everything to 11'. We don't have a bayonet, we have a chainsaw bayonet. We don't have hail, we have razor hail. We don't have bats, we have bats that kill you. Having all of that stuff and that history we had to ask, what are we bringing to the table that doesn't change the essence of what *Gears* is, but also feels that it's a appropriate for a next-gen experience? When people see the Wind Flares and the Wind Flurries and things like that I think it's going to be really exciting"

MAP BREAKDOWNS A quick overview of the new GOW maps

SYMMETRY

As you can see this map has a symmetrical base design and this is true of all of the maps we've seen for the game so far. Ultimately, *Gears* is a team-based multiplayer experience and as such balancing the experience of each side is absolutely essential.



WEAPON DROPS

All of the maps we played had the same weapon drops to go after with the one exception that the Torque Bow and Boomshot were occasionally available. Otherwise the Dropshot and Longshot were the guns of choice to chase after with a lot of pitched battles around these points on the map.

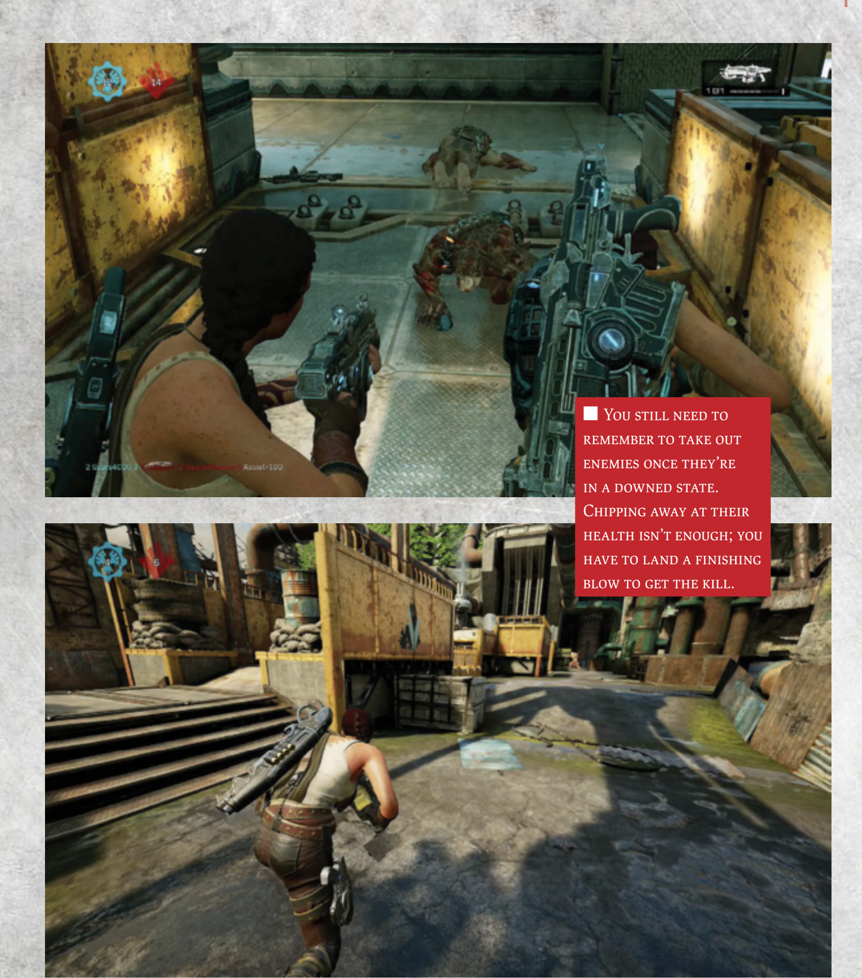


There are a few other new elements, of course, many of which have been dictated by the choice of setting. With the years that have passed and the death of the Locust, some of the biological weapons that helped to vary the gameplay in the later part of the series have been lost (the Digger Launcher for instance). These have been replaced with more industrial-looking devices, reminiscent of some classic *Unreal Tournament* armaments or even *Dead Space*. The Dropshot for instance was a favourite pick-up weapon in our multiplayer tests of *Gears 4*, firing a laser-guided drill that flies through the air and bores into the ground when you let go of the right trigger, then explodes.

It's a nice variation on a grenade or mine launcher that's perfect for getting around cover and a lot of fun to catch the enemy out with. It's a great example of all the things that make *Gears* what it is: meaty, almost cumbersome-looking weaponry, visceral and cartoonish violence and gorgeously layered, mechanical and industrial sound effects. The whirr of the chainsaw blades on a Lancer or the crunch of the Boomshot reloading are classic examples too and those live on in *Gears 4*. There's a visual and audio footprint to every element of this series that The Coalition has managed to capture brilliantly from what we've seen so far.

The same can be said of the new cast of characters we'll be following in *Gears 4*, already looking like a far more robust and three-dimensional bunch than the enjoyable but meat-headed team we were introduced to a decade ago. Marcus, Dom and co. matured and tackled difficult themes as the series progressed, but JD, Kait and Del will be have them from the start, albeit with the intention to not lose that important sense of humour as Ferguson already alluded to. Perhaps just as importantly, it was a concept that had already been talked about at Epic.

"We were coming in hot," Fergusson insists. "I walked into a team that had already staffed up for another game. This was a really big team and I was like, 'How can I shorten the pre-production on this?'. We can start from scratch and have all the conversations again, but I said, 'I've had all of these conversations before, so if we want to shortcut this, why don't we just start accepting some of the things that we had talked about or that I had talked about back at Epic?'. Things that went around like JD Fenix and Kait and the Swarm are things that we had already talked through. That allowed us to go from a blank page to within two weeks having a story. We changed it from what it would have been at Epic, but at least we had some foundation of a new generation with JD Fenix, Kait and Del, where they are going, and within two weeks we had a skeleton we could start hanging things on top of. So, it was a good shorthand."



■ YOU STILL NEED TO REMEMBER TO TAKE OUT ENEMIES ONCE THEY'RE IN A DOWNED STATE. CHIPPING AWAY AT THEIR HEALTH ISN'T ENOUGH; YOU HAVE TO LAND A FINISHING BLOW TO GET THE KILL.



LIMITED VERTICALITY

None of the maps had much verticality, but there was a little. Harbor had some slightly elevated sections, but they were largely blocked off by walls and so not useful as sniper positions. Foundation features some sunken areas, but these are also walled in with limited lines of sight from above.



TIGHT MAPS

All of the maps in the beta are very tightly packed, which makes matches fast and frantic, and particular good for the new Dodgeball mode. In this new mode, when you rejoin the match you also spawn on top of your team, which makes things even more intense.

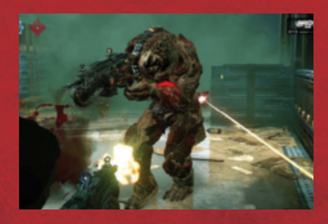


ONLINE: THE KEY FACTS

What everyone will be learning from the Gears Of War 4 beta

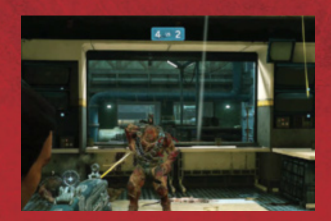
IT'S ESPORTS FRIENDY

The Coalition is building this *Gears* with the pro gaming scene in mind and as such has approached multiplayer from several angles to make sure it caters to new players, more social players, competitive players and eSports. One key new feature is that a slot on each team is reserved for a spectator, so eSports events can better showcase matches during live broadcasts.



IT HAS A NEW MODE

Dodgeball is the first new mode to be revealed for *Gears 4* and is available in the beta. It sees two teams of five battle it out in classic fashion except there are no traditional respawns. If you die you can only get back in the game if someone on your team kills an opponent. The first team to wipe out the opposition wins. It can see some amazing turnarounds if the last player on one side can string together a couple of kills.





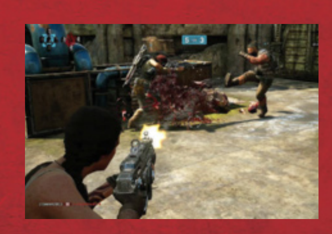
IT WILL LAUNCH WITH TEN MAPS

The Coalition has confirmed that ten maps will be available at launch, nine of which are brand new (included Harbor, Dam and Foundation from the beta) and the tenth being the classic Gridlock. From then new maps will be added every month for free, with other maps being rotated out as new one's arrive. In order to keep your favourite map you'll need to buy it, but only one player needs it to set up a match. The Coalition has compared it to a seasonal restaurant menu that rotates over time.



THERE'S A COOP MULTIPLAYER MODE

As a means of helping new players master the mechanics and systems of *Gears* multiplayer a co-op mode has been added. Importantly this is not Horde mode, but a five versus five mode with all human players on one side and bots on the other. You can set a difficulty level before you begin and play online matches pretty much as normal, just against bots until you're confident you understand the rules.



THERE ARE CARD PACKS

As is now standard for online games, *Gears 4* is introducing card packs with bonus items in each. These can be earned in-game with no real-world money required, but can be purchased if you want. Importantly, all items are purely cosmetic, such as variations on character and weapon skins and can be used in the campaign. XP enhancement cards are also in the packs and can be played at any time, but are only used upon successfully completing the task stated so you won't lose them if you lose the match.



ACTIVE RELOADS RETURNS

***Gears Of War: Judgment* lost the damage bonus for successfully pulling off an active reload, but it's coming back for *Gears 4*. It now lasts for the entirety of the clip, can be activated at any time, but does have a cooldown on it so you can't spam it.**



NEW VISIBLE RANKING SYSTEM

As part of the move towards accommodating every skill level of player into *Gears 4*, The Coalition is introducing a new ranking system, which actually looks very similar to that used by Splash Damage in its game Dirty Bomb (pictured). Splash Damage is also helping out on the multiplayer to this title. It ranges from a bronze level to silver, gold, diamond and an elite level, and each of these has some divisions within them too. It should help find you the best fit of opponents in matchmaking.



And so a new group of characters get to lead off *Gears Of War* into a new era for a new generation of players (according to Fergusson, 45 per cent of *Ultimate Edition* players were new to the *Gears* series) without the fear that the team could bump up against the last timeline. Emergence Day, The Pendulum Wars, another planet and even 'doing a Spider-Man' and rebooting the franchise were all discussed, but this approach just made more sense and allowed for a greater feeling of discovery this time out.

"There were a bunch of different ways we could go, but at the end of the day we said this is really about man versus monster. It's about fighting what goes bump in the night," Osieja tells us. "If you remember *Gears 1* started 14 years into the war, so everything was known. The guys all knew each other and everybody had a name, they knew what the Locust was and they knew what a Berserker was. They knew what everything was. But now we're going to get that sense of discovery. You're the first people to see these new enemies and as a group we get to discover it together to create our bonds and our relationships that are going to take place over this one night in the wilds of Sera."



And just as those original games were gradually able to introduce ideas long talked about from the beginning of *Gears Of War*, so *Gears 4* is still filling in those gaps that Bleszinski, Perry and the others didn't quite manage to squeeze in, such as the new Yank move over cover. "We'd gotten to a position in *Gears 3* where we had created both the Mantle Kick and the Yank," reveals Fergusson. "We had both features implemented in Unreal Engine 3 and we decided it was just too much for us to manage, so we had to pick just one. So we picked the one that was aggressive and picked the Mantle Kick."

The idea was to bring in some melee attacks that would stop the blind-fire duels that inevitably took place when two players or a player versus the AI were either side of the same piece of cover. The Yank pulls the opponent over the cover, leaving them in a stun state for a quick combat knife kill or blast from your gun. "I remembered the Yank actually being pretty good, it's just that there were a lot of challenges around it from a production standpoint, so that's when we prototyped it again and saw that it was really working," Fergusson continues. "So then we looked at the Mantle Kick and how we could take the slowness out of it and we created the Vault Kick [a fluid leap over cover from a Roadie Run]. So with those kinds of things it was just taking an idea that had been started and blowing it out, smoothing it down."

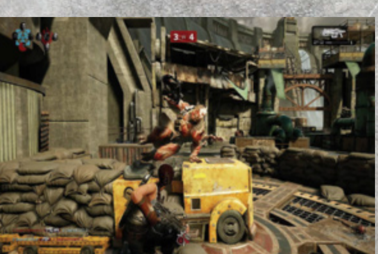
Once again, this all speaks to a team trying to maintain continuity with the past while evolving. "We see *1*, *2* and *3* as an evolution and a maturation of cover over time and I think we're taking the next evolutionary step in that," explains Fergusson. "We were afraid that if we tried to do things that were too revolutionary we would be judged harshly for taking something good and potentially breaking it."

And the same was true of harking back to the atmosphere of the very first game, calling on some classic horror game mechanics and moments. "I like to use the word 'tense'," Fergusson points out. "I think that's the word that really underscores things, because when we talk horror people start to go off to survival horror land and we're not that. It's hard to disempower a guy with a chainsaw gun. He's not walking down a hallway backwards in the dark afraid for his life. But at the same time there's this tenseness." With the Swarm enemies being introduced, the Wind Flares causing chaos

You can now tag enemies in multiplayer by clicking in the Left Stick when you have them in your sights. This makes the enemy visible to everyone else on your team with a red dot above their position. It also earns you support points.

"We don't have a bayonet, we have a chainsaw bayonet. We don't have hail, we have razor hail"





The new Vault Kick move can also be utilised to quickly glide over cover while Roadie Running. Simply tap B as you approach cover in a crouch and your character will leap over. If an enemy is behind the cover you'll also kick them into a stunned state.

and the world falling apart around you, there should be no shortage of tension in this new campaign. Online, however, it's all about gruesome fun and working as a team.

There's a renewed focus on eSports and making sure ranking and matchmaking is properly managed, a new card system adds purely cosmetic items to your experience that can be earned with in-game cash or purchased separately and a rotating roster of maps that will be updated monthly and build on the ten locations you'll get to enjoy at launch. Fergusson also promises the game will be locked at 60 frames per second and 1080p by launch just as the *Ultimate Edition* was, although he warns that won't be the case for the beta as optimisation is still being worked on. Most importantly of all, this is a proper beta test, not just a glorified demo. With around six months to launch, The Coalition is far from finished with this game and is keen to get feedback.

"The message we have to get out there is that somehow the industry has mutated the word beta to mean demo, so I'm really trying to highlight to people, 'Look you really need to come to this with certain expectations'," Fergusson implores with intensity. "We need actual feedback and there will be things that will be wrong that we will fix because of their feedback, that's super important."

From our time with the online content, it doesn't graphically impress as much as the single-player footage that's out there so far, but it feels like classic *Gears* through and through. It's meaty, explosive and satisfying again and again. The maps in the beta are relatively flat in terms of verticality, which is pretty traditional for the series, but offer some great choke points and possibilities for flanking. Good team play really appears to be getting rewarded in the game too, as our leaderboards showed players will relatively low kill/death ratios still ranking well after a match.

"One of the things we're doing, behind the covers a little bit, is working out how we can lift the support player," Fergusson reveals. "I consider myself a support player. When I play any other game I'll play as the engineer, I'm the guy placing turrets or repairing stuff. I'm a support player at heart. One of the things that we've been doing a lot of design around is looking at not just the frontliner who's got a shotgun and is wall-bouncing [high-level move of bouncing between walls/cover to make yourself hard to shoot], but the guy who is off to the side who's suppressing with the Lancer. How do you give points to the guy that's spotting? How do you give assist points? Things that existed, but we're looking at ways to embrace that even more."

For the most part this takes a little of the emphasis off the K/D scores of players, but that's not the case for what is likely to be the highlight of the beta: a new mode called Dodgeball. This sees Team Death Match enhanced with a mechanic that has a team member respawn for every enemy killed. It's a style of team game that can see amazing swings in fortune from just one player getting a kill streak going and is frantic fun to play in a tight map. Along with all the other classic modes we're expecting to see in the final game, including Horde mode, it's just one of many evolutionary pieces that is making *Gears 4* feel fresh and yet still familiar.





PARAGON

HOW EPIC GAMES IS BRINGING THE MOBA BACK TO THE PLAYERS

The MOBA may just be the most popular videogame genre on the planet right now, and yet it has found itself in an oddly precarious position. Despite its enduring success over the years, the games that fall under the MOBA umbrella have a habit of being inherently divisive; communities have been divided and friendships have fallen. As with anything in life, passions can turn poisonous, and perhaps that's why those with little to no experience of MOBAs attempting to try one out typically receive such furious condescension from more experienced players in-game. A similar fury can then be found mirrored in those that, as a result, scorn the insular, cryptic MOBA-playing community.

Which is surprising, really, when you consider that industry leader *League Of Legends* has a somewhat ridiculous 67 million unique players storming the lanes of the Summoner's Rift every month. MOBAs are, despite the conflicts, wildly popular. To put those 67 million players into perspective, *World Of Warcraft* is held up as a landmark success story for PC gaming and yet it peaked at 12 million subscribers, while the latest instalment to the *Call Of Duty* franchise sold a mere 22.31 million copies across five platforms. And yet, should a developer dare mention the 'MOBA' acronym anywhere near the promotion of an upcoming title it'll likely be followed with a chorus of 'It's more of a shared-world shooter'.

Considering this, you might rightfully wonder why *Gears Of War* and *Unreal Tournament* developer Epic Games is taking on the MOBA at all with its latest, *Paragon*. It might seem like the studio is inviting a wealth of negativity straight to its doorstep by stepping up to a genre that has come to be defined in equal parts by its toxic player base, by the difficult-to-parse meta-games that change from month to month, and the intrusive microtransaction models that keep the coffers full and servers running at the expense of players. In reality, it isn't all *that* bad. The decision to forge ahead with *Paragon* comes from a good place: Epic is attempting to alter the perception of the genre and take back the MOBA for the good of the players.



Paragon is a game built around capitalising on strategic opportunities and mastering the mechanics, it's a faithful MOBA that just so happens to be played from a third-person perspective. The focus on action combat should make it a little more appealing for the console crowd.

A NEW BREED OF MOBA

"One of the things we decided early on was that we were really going to embrace the MOBA. We had a real good internal debate about how MOBAs were the new kid on the block and about whether we really wanted to even be one," Steve Superville tells **games™**, the creative director clearly unfazed by the gargantuan task that lies ahead of him and his team. "What we noticed was that there's a lot of confusion about what a MOBA actually is.

"There's a lot of 'Hero Shooters' coming out that people seem to label as MOBAs, but they aren't. Typically, they don't have an in-game progression, they don't have itemisation, and they don't have objective-based game modes – or maybe they do, but it's just 'Do TDM around this objective' and that sort of thing. We wanted to very clearly distinguish that we are a MOBA. That's what we are going for."

Epic is attempting to kill the various misconceptions that are so often levelled at the genre, and its implied stable-mates, such as *Overwatch* and *Battleborn*, with a back-to-basics approach that focuses first and foremost on the community. It's an approach that isn't overly dissimilar to the creation of the original *Defense Of The Ancients*, the *World Of Warcraft III: Reign Of Chaos* mod that sought to give players a new way to enjoy competitive multiplayer back in 2003.

But creating accessibility without diluting the basic experience is a difficult task. Those that have flocked to the likes of *League Of Legends*, *DOTA 2* and *Heroes Of The Storm* are so often entranced (for many of the same reasons as others quickly turn away) by its strategic depth, wide variety of Heroes and robust suite of tactical opportunities. Epic is only too aware that none of these elements can be sacrificed in an effort to make *Paragon* readily playable for both PC and PlayStation 4 owners when it rolls into open beta this summer.

> "PEOPLE ARE LIKE, 'FINE, EPIC, I HATE MOBAS BUT OKAY, YOU GOT MY INTEREST"

But like we said, *Paragon* is coming from a good place. This doesn't feel like a careless cash grab or an opportunity for Epic to simply push its new 'Games as a Service' mantra onto the world, nor is it even a desperate attempt to make a splash on the increasingly lucrative eSports scene; the intention is to build a strategic and fun competitive multiplayer offering that promotes player success and enjoyment above all else. That's something that developed out of the studio's desire to engage the community in the same kind of 'water cooler' discursive experience that so readily captured the team's attention in the early months of development.

"The decision to develop *Paragon* came about pretty organically," remarks Superville. "When we started the project, the task was just to make a competitive multiplayer game. We started doing a lot of investigation and competitive research, we spent literally a couple of months playing all of the games in the competitive landscape. It was one of those few times in a game developer's career where, your mom teases that all you do is play games all day, but that's all we actually did! We tried to do each for a couple of days; *Call Of Duty*, *PlanetSide 2*, we'd play MOBAs and RTSs, and just about anything else. If it had a competitive element, we would play it, including *Hearthstone* and *Magic: The Gathering*, as well as different board games and stuff like that."

"What really kind of stuck was, as we were going through this process, the stories that people would come in and talk about the next day as they went home and also played games would almost always have to do with MOBAs," he says, noting the team once toyed with developing a more traditional multiplayer game, as well as a competitive experience set in a "*Grand Theft Auto* kind of open-world setting" before finally settling on building a MOBA.

"They were these stories where the players were creating these combat narratives and each one was unique. Each one had such a connection to each person because they had devised it with their





CROSS-PLAY COMPATIBLE

EPIC'S STEVE SUPERVILLE ON DEVELOPING PARAGON FOR **PC** AND **PS4** SIMULTANEOUSLY

"It's been fun… it's a constraint, but developers love constraints. From day one, a problem we knew we would have to tackle early is the number of input buttons we use – because the keyboard has many buttons, but the controller has significantly less. That made us make tough choices, and really, we got a win-win. *Paragon* is paced in such a way that people can understand how combat was happening and be able to respond to it – which really helped us settle in to the idea that MOBAs have stories that are created inside of combat – and we were able to bring that control scheme over to the controller. We believe that competitive games should be everywhere where there are competitive gamers. That includes consoles. At the same time, we knew we wanted to allow groups of friends to be able to play together, so we set about making sure that we can do cross-platform play – with cross-progression and cross-purchase. The only thing that we haven't tackled yet is cross-voice, and we don't know if we will get to that in the near-term or if that's a bit further out, but we would love to get to it. Everything works towards one community. That is the goal."



"WE BELIEVE THAT COMPETITIVE GAMES SHOULD BE EVERYWHERE WHERE THERE ARE COMPETITIVE GAMERS. THAT INCLUDES CONSOLES"



The reason *Paragon* is undergoing such a lengthy beta process is down to Epic believing that there's no way it could feasibly play-test and balance the game without a large number of players running riot across its three lanes and jungles.



friends. So that idea of a sticky, story-telling experience really stood out from what we have done [as a company] with *Gears Of War* and *Unreal Tournament*. So that led us to thinking, could we take a stab at this MOBA thing and what would that look like?"

THE EPIC TOUCH

"*Paragon* was born out of our love and exploration of MOBAs," reaffirms Superville. "'We are Epic Games, and we are historically good at making action. Is there a way that we can meld what we are good at with this new genre that has been so engaging for players?' And what came out of that was *Paragon*."

The result is an experience that's fresh but familiar; refined yet expansive. To a certain extent, yes, it *does* look like a third-person *League Of Legends* and, yes, perhaps it does handle a little like *SMITE* with a budget behind it, though both of these comparisons do *Paragon* a huge disservice. The pace is quicker than your traditional genre game; the combat and movement is faster and more immediate than any MOBA you've ever seen or played before.

The action has been taken down to a tight, familiar third-person POV and the skill aspect focuses less on your mouse clicks and more on precise and fluid movement. Attacks actually need to be aimed in real-time, like a traditional third-person shooter, all the while being mindful of your cooldowns and specific hero advantages and disadvantages. To its credit, Epic has been able to ensure that *Paragon* still acts and feels like a MOBA, only it's been able to design it in such as way as to appeal to the hardcore loyalists as much as it is the third-person action/shooter fans.

Epic was prepared for the inevitable comparisons. If anything, it's revelling in the attention. "It's really hard to not be compared to *anything*," laughs Superville, as we wonder whether the studio is disheartened that the game isn't being judged on its own merits. "There's nothing new under the sun, there's just different takes and different flavours of tried and true things, where you mix and match a bunch of ideas, and that's okay.

"Way back in the day I worked on *America's Army* and people were like, 'Oh, you have Smoke Grenades? That's stealing from *Counter-Strike*.' And I was like, 'Hang on a second, the Army has been around *way* longer than *Counter-Strike*.' The internet in general just seems to have an immediate reaction of, 'Oh, that's just like that other thing' until people can get into it for themselves… that's the game development world across the board. So it didn't really scare us all that much. We just wanted to offer something that we thought was novel and done in the Epic calibre."

That 'Epic calibre' is clear for all to see once you take your first steps into the world of Agora. It's the only map available in the beta; though, as any competitive multiplayer fan will tell you, sometimes one is all you need. All the genre staples are there: three lanes, jungles, minions, towers and cores to destroy to secure victory after 40 minutes of game time. You've seen all of that before, but you haven't seen it look quite this good. As ever, Epic's art team and programmers are pushing stunning results out of the Unreal Engine 4. It's a vibrant locale, with lush foliage masking the densely packed jungle spaces that sit deeply between the lanes.

IS THE DECK STACKED AGAINST EPIC?

THOUGHTS AND CONCERNS ON PARAGON'S TAKE ON THE IN-GAME STOREFRONT

Paragon doesn't feature a traditional storefront, it's one of the ways Epic is attempting to make the pace of rounds faster – not to mention more organically focused on skill and perception. Instead of farming for coins and spending your earnings on in-round items, instead you'll be able to activate specific cards from a deck you have pre-assembled ahead of the game starting. The cards can give you specific buffs or enhance certain character traits and statistics. Understanding this system and building a solid deck is as important as mastering the combat and movement mechanics.

It has quite the learning curve attached to it – not unlike road-testing a new *Hearthstone* build for the first time. Only, a game of *Hearthstone* will typically take closer to ten minutes, not 45 like a game of *Paragon*. The thing is, with a MOBA, dying can have drastic consequences – not just on your personal in-game level progression, but also to your entire team. Giving away silly deaths is the easiest way to anger an entire room of gamers, but is it really your fault if you've equipped a useless deck? It's a system that shows a lot of promise, but it's also the only part of *Paragon* that we see causing a real point of contention between players.

"I understand the concern," says Steve Superville, creative director on *Paragon*. "One of the goals of the card system is to make knowledge and understanding of the game an integral chance to gain an advantage and to succeed. If you look at a game like *Hearthstone* is that the community – and we've already seen a bit of this already – that the community starts aggregating this knowledge base to help everybody learn how to make smart choices. I do understand the concern, but the goal of the deck system and the card system is to provide strategic opportunity, where you have a chance to be clever and bring something into the game that surprises you and catches others off guard.

"We have work to do to explain the system more clearly to players, but I feel like the same thing has happened in the other MOBAs. As the meta shifts around, the players that don't understand how the shift happened are caught off guard and they eventually catch up, which is a real healthy thing. It shows the game is driven by the community, that it's vibrant and alive and fresh all the time; that there's always something new to learn. When we talk about people investing thousands of hours into these games, I think this is the reason they can spend so much time, because there is so much room to grow."







You won't be able to purchase cards with real money currency, you can only unlock them through playing the game.



Epic has been hard at work on *Paragon* for a number of years now and it's intently focused on ensuring it's a game designed to foster a strong community. The replay system introduced ensures players are always able to capture excellent plays and share them onto the Internet.

And when we talk about seeing the battlefield from a different perspective, we're also talking about the very real perspective shifts that occur as you move down a lane as your drafted hero, escorting the minions towards towers in an effort to push the battle up further towards the inevitable end-game battle at the core. Epic has introduced verticality into its map design and it has a huge impact on the pace and flow of play; the map makes wonderful use of height to provide and obscure vision.

One side rises above the towers, giving enemy heroes the opportunity to fire at you from above, while the other dips low to provide perfect opportunities for flanking and advanced manoeuvre executions. Real elevation on an open map means you'll have to rethink the way you approach your basic attacks and cooldown-controlled ultimate skillshots, and it makes *Paragon* feel fresh and exciting in a way that other MOBA games haven't been able to deliver.

"We wanted to attach you to your hero and really make you feel powerful, and a part of that is the third-person camera, it gets you away from feeling like a puppet master and gets you in control of the characters," says Superville, adding. "We thought from the beginning that when we looked at MOBAs, while we had a lot of fun playing them, when we watched the cinematics they offered, this big heroic fantasy wasn't necessarily delivered in the gameplay – despite the gameplay being extremely fun. So one of our goals was to try to do stuff differently, but in a way that players would feel like they are being brought down into the fight."



ESPORT AMBITIONS

While it doesn't feel as though this is Epic's primary concern with *Paragon*, eSports has become an integral, unavoidable part of the MOBA package. It wouldn't be difficult for us to attribute the enduring success of *DOTA 2* and *League Of Legends* to their huge professional gaming scene; it has kept interest afloat throughout meta-changes, internet rages, and Reddit-led Hero debates. And just look at the results: *DOTA 2* was able to offer a prize pool totalling more than $18 million for last year's The International 2015,





while *League Of Legends* boasted a unique viewer count of 36 million people for its 2015 Worlds' Finals. Providing top-level play for a global audience is becoming an integral part of keeping these experiences interesting to a range of gamers and viewers.

And yet Superville doesn't even seem that concerned if it never makes a splash in the professional scene or not. "How focused are we on professional gaming and eSports? Right now, in early access, it is not a primary focus, because we know we have so far to go in order to make a highly competitive game. That is what we are focused on," says Superville, reiterating his belief that an eSports success needs to grow organically to have any longevity. "The community will let us know when we are ready to be an eSport – if ever. When that time comes, we will best decide how to support it.

"We are interested in creating a vibrant community that lasts for years. I think it only succeeds through a grass root, driven approach from the community. Otherwise it's just propped up by the publisher's money and [their] own events, and people will still go because there's something to be won, but it won't be because of a passion, necessarily. I think the path to success is to satisfy the community, make them happy, and then give them tools to do awesome things. If eSports is one of those awesome things, then I would love that!"

> "OUR COMMITMENT IS TO BE OPEN AND TRANSPARENT WITH THE COMMUNITY, AND IF WE MAKE A MISTAKE WE OWN IT AND [FIX] IT"

Epic will now need to keep a close eye on *Paragon* to see whether the systems and mechanics it has introduced are enough to keep people engaged in the long term; to see whether it can develop and thrive independent of studio intervention. Right now, the beta, featuring an array of gamers from the dip-in-and-out casuals to the hardcore pro players, is proving that the game can function just fine on PS4 and PC, and that it certainly has the potential to survive an initial release window with a healthy player base intact. But long-term success is largely on the shoulders of the competitive gamers, a market that *Paragon* will need to entice away from other games to find enduring success.

IT'S ALL IN THE EXECUTION

At present, we have faith in *Paragon*. It's in a fantastic position. A fresh take on the genre gives lapsed MOBA fans a reason to return, the sublime mechanics may tempt some fans away from other games, and the strong production values may even be enough to get the console-only crowd interested in the action. But, in spite of all of that, does *Paragon* have what it takes to compete with the industry leaders? Will a player who has already put hundreds, if not thousands of hours into their favourite MOBA really be tempted to give it all up for something new? MOBA fans have a habit of picking an allegiance and sticking to it, and that's a reality that even Superville thinks will likely never change.

"I don't know that that's actually an achievable goal," he laughs, considering the possibility of tempting over some of those millions of players entrenched in *League Of Legends*, *DOTA 2* and *Heroes Of The Storm*. "If you're really invested in a particular game or a football team, and you're all in… there's no way you're going to be able to convince a Broncos fan to become a Patriots fan, it just isn't going to happen.

"But we did think that those games have been around for a number of years and while they do have a lot of players, they also have players who have fallen out of them. In terms of capturing market, people will love the game that they love and if they've fatigued on their favourite game ever and want a break from it then hopefully we have something to offer."

Perhaps then, that isn't the market Epic should be worried about anyway. Better to try to appeal to the crowd that hasn't managed to click with the genre and doesn't quite understand the appeal. *Paragon* really should be looking at enticing this essentially an untapped market, this legion of gamers who have sworn off a genre due to its density, depth, or unfriendly player base. But *Paragon* is an exciting new opportunity with a learning curve that doesn't instantly slap new players in the face,and as such it stands a good chance of turning the negativity so commonly associated with the genre around, whilst still appealing to those that love a pure laning experience.

"Internally, we've seen people go from being quite sceptical to really wanting to play more," says Superville. "If you never had a chance to experience the delight that comes from MOBA combat and MOBA stories and strategy, then we are offering them something that is much more familiar [to traditional action games]. I think that is reinforced by what I've read and watched online where people are like, 'Fine Epic, I hate MOBAs but okay, you got my interest,' and that's a great place to be."



eSports isn't a huge focus for the team right now as it works on ensuring the competitive play is as strong as possible ahead of launch. If the community wants to play it professionally, then the team will make it happen.

Paragon will launch with just the one map this Summer, though Epic is working on bringing others maps to the game in the future.

KNOW YOUR ROLE

GET COMFORTABLE PLAYING PARAGON BY CHOOSING YOUR PERFECT CLASS





FINAL FANTASY XV A UNIVERSE REBORN

You thought it was just a game, but Final Fantasy XV is now an entire world of entertainment



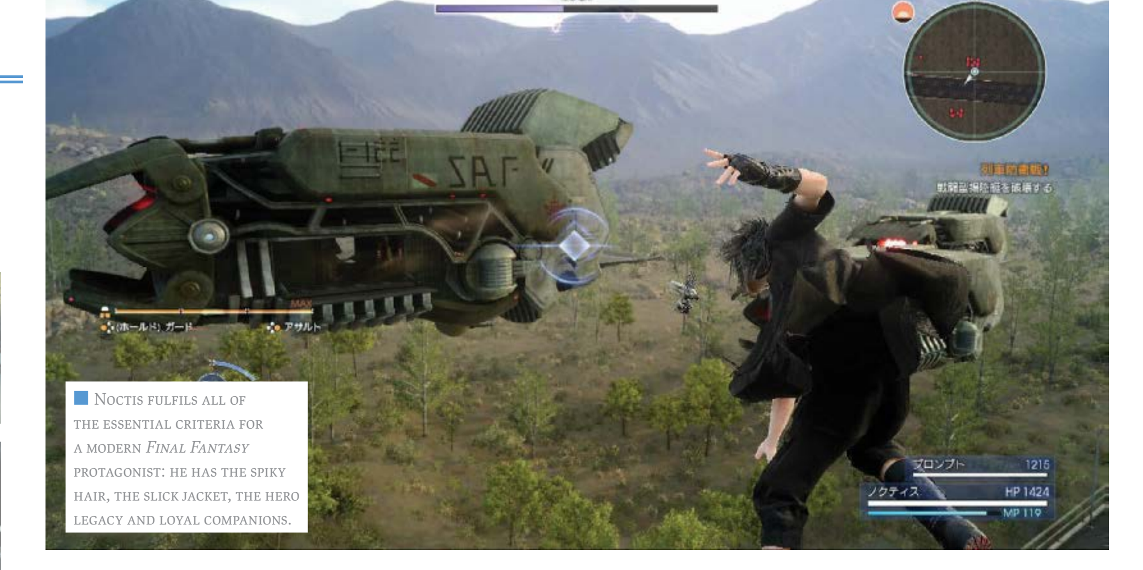
“INSPIRATION FOR HAVING A SEAMLESS WORLD CAME FROM, FUNNILY ENOUGH, THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: OCARINA OF TIME”

In 2006 we thought we were getting *Final Fantasy Versus XIII*. 2013 saw that expectation dashed, with the same project becoming *Final Fantasy XV*. Now, in 2016, the latest revelation is that the next major instalment in this most venerable of Japanese roleplaying game franchises is not simply a standalone game at all. Instead, it's what Square Enix is calling a 'universe'; an entire system beyond the actual game itself, comprised of releases across various forms of media, all of which are designed to enhance the experience of *Final Fantasy XV*.

'Reclaim Your Throne' is a simple tagline bookending one of the numerous trailers revealed during a Los Angeles-hosted event dedicated to communicating new information on a game that has now been in development for a decade. The reference is one made towards protagonist Noctis' royal lineage, but the sentiment works equally well when applied to *FFXV* itself.

This suite of releases – encompassing everything from a brand new demo to a standalone movie, an anime mini-series to a smartphone app – is designed quite clearly as a means to open as many doors as possible to what is arguably Square Enix's biggest release of all time. Given the difficulties experienced throughout its protracted development, combined with the fact that this franchise has been hit-and-miss ever since its PlayStation 1 heyday, success here is essential rather than optional.

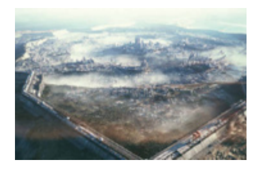
It doesn't matter whether new converts to *Final Fantasy* are enticed by the app, the anime, the movie, or even by the fact that Florence and the Machine has recorded a cover version of *Stand By Me* to promote the game, the important thing is to provide options through which new players can enter. The messaging is clear: attracting new players is top of the agenda and the only means through which *Final Fantasy* can reclaim its own lost throne at the top of the RPG pyramid.



■ Noctis fulfils all of the essential criteria for a modern *Final Fantasy* protagonist: he has the spiky hair, the slick jacket, the hero legacy and loyal companions.







■ Despite its most successful games containing groups of both male and female characters, love interests and friends, *FFXV*'s party will contain only male characters, which could backfire with an audience keen to return to *Final Fantasy*'s glory days.

"The real objective of the expanded *Final Fantasy XV* universe is to encourage as many people as possible to play the main game itself," explains director Hajime Tabata in response to whether the extended projects around *FFXV* might be expanded even further in the build up to the 30 September release. "If we think of other projects that fit this goal then they will be something we would consider doing. We really are thinking about everything we do in terms of how we make the *Final Fantasy XV* game the best it can possibly be and how we optimise the experience for people in a way that allows every element of the universe to feed into the playing of the game."

Both the anime and movie are designed to dig into the backstory of *FFXV* and provide extra context for those players seeking to fully absorb the world created by Tabata and his team. *Brotherhood: Final Fantasy XV* is the name given to the five part anime series that introduces primary protagonist Noctis and his three male companions that accompany him throughout *FFXV* proper. All episodes are being made free to stream across YouTube; the first of five is available now. More ambitious is the feature length CGI movie *Kingsglaive: Final Fantasy XV*, a project directed by Takeshi Nozue of *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children* fame.

"[COMBAT IS] EASY TO GET INTO FOR PEOPLE THAT MAYBE ARE NOT SO KEEN ON THE RPG-STYLE OF TACTICAL BATTLE SYSTEMS"

The goal here is to introduce the core conflict of the world by focusing on Noctis' father, King Regis, and his bid to protect his realm from the more powerful forces of the invading Niflheim empire. No expense is being spared to make sure *Kingsglaive* hits the right chord with a Western audience, with Sean Bean (*Lord Of The Rings*), Lena Headey (*Game Of Thrones*) and Aaron Paul (*Breaking Bad*) having been cast in voice acting roles.

These audiovisual enterprises are flanked by a mobile app, *Justice Monsters V*, that lets you play a pinball mini-game included in *FFXV* on the go. "Really, the mobile game is a way of enjoying something that you see in *Final Fantasy XV* at anytime and anyplace that you want to on your mobile phone. It's a way for you to enjoy it on your own time," explains the app's producer Daisuke Motohasi. "You're going to see the monsters in *Final Fantasy XV* appear in *Justice Monsters V*, or it might be the other way around: if you play a lot of *Justice Monsters V* then you might see monsters as pinballs that you'll later see in the main game as proper monsters."

While the app will be free to download, some form of as yet undisclosed monetisation is going to be included. The promise, though, as ever with games such as this, is that this will not be what Motohasi calls a "buy to win type of game".

At the core of all of these releases is the idea of switching over to a more globalised means of designing and developing *Final Fantasy*. By Tabata's own admission, the series has for too long sleepwalked through releases and taken success for granted. Recent apathetic responses to the likes of *Final Fantasy XIII*, and the disaster that was *Final Fantasy XIV*'s initial release, have made it clear that more effort needs to be put into making sure that this franchise remains capable of retaining major appeal outside of its native Japan – particularly in the face of the increasing dominance of Western-made RPGs such as *The Elder Scrolls*, *The Witcher* and *Fallout*.

Switching over to a global model of design that sees Western tastes and approaches absorbed into the core construction process has been, according to Tabata "the most challenging part of development." Rather than developing the game in isolation in Japan, before localising the content and releasing at a later date throughout the rest of the world (which has been the preferred approach previously), the setup now is more unified and inclusive.

As a result, Square Enix expects bigger returns – hence the willingness to promote the game as much as possible through movies, anime series and apps. All of this investment and global outlook, however, is not cheap. With a frankness that is generally not expected from a developer/publisher of this scale and renown, Tabata is not afraid to reveal that "a total of about ten million copies worldwide over the entire lifecycle of the product" is what the company is aiming for.

To put that into perspective, *Final Fantasy XIII* managed roughly 7.5 million copies across its lifecycle on all platforms. *Final Fantasy VII*, the most successful entry in the series in terms of sales numbers, has hit 11 million (including PC/mobile sales). Clearly, then, a very special performance is required here for this latest addition to Square Enix's most famous franchise to be deemed a success… the task at hand made no easier given that there are currently no plans to release on PC.

If you want to get an early look at something roughly resembling the game itself then you can download the latest taster, dubbed *Platinum Demo*, right now. Very different in tone to the previously released *Episode Duscae* demo, Platinum puts you in the shoes of a sleeping young Noctis as he struggles to overcome a dream turned nightmare. Rather than representing a slice of the final game, the objective here is to introduce a number of elements that will appear in some more complex form upon final release. Given that these elements are taken completely out of context, *Platinum* has something of the aura of a tech demo about it.



■ Some locations in *Final Fantasy XV*'s open world can only be reached by the newly unveiled flying car, although such places are entirely optional when it comes to the main narrative.

Monsters range in size from the enormous to the tiny, with different creatures roaming the land depending on the time of day.

If you don't want to ride in your car then you can opt for the more traditional option of a chocobo. Be warned that your journey time will increase, however.



Combat abandons the traditional turn-based approach for something resembling an action game.

HOLLYWOOD CASTING

Stars of the big and silver screens unite in Kingsglaive: Final Fantasy XV

Designed as a means of delivering the back story for some of *Final Fantasy XV*'s major characters, Kingsglaive is a fully CGI movie directed by *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children* director Takeshi Nozue. Presently the film's release date is no more specific than '2016', but the major actors for the English-language edition have been revealed…



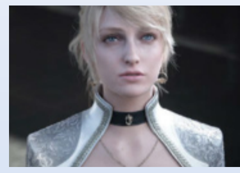
SEAN BEAN

Having appeared in everything from *Lord Of The Rings* to *Game Of Thrones*, *GoldenEye* to *Ronin*, Sean Bean plays King Regis. Regis is the father of *Final Fantasy XV*'s Noctis and the protector of his world's one remaining Crystal. In order to stop the war between his people and the more powerful Niflheim empire he must hand over the Crystal and give up all land outside of his imperial capital city.



AARON PAUL

Famous for his portrayal of Jesse Pinkman in *Breaking Bad*, Aaron Paul plays the role of Nyx: a member of King Regis' official guard (known as the Kingsglaive). Nyx is the film's protagonist, so expect him to get plenty of screen time. Paul is famously a major videogame fan and has also appeared in the 2014 *Need For Speed* movie.



LENA HEADEY

Most recognised today for her performances as *Game of Thrones*' infamous Cersei Lannister, Headey is the voice of Lady Lunafreya within *Kingsglaive*. Lunafreya is a childhood friend of *Final Fantasy XV* protagonist Noctis, as well as being betrothed to him. She is a captive of Niflheim, the state seeking to take the world's one remaining Crystal from King Regis.

FINAL FANTASY XV DEVELOPMENT TIMELINE

The major steps taken towards the 30 September 2016 release date

MAY 2006
Final Fantasy Versus XIII announced alongside *Final Fantasy XIII* at E3, both games to be exclusive to the PS3

JUN 2007
Final Fantasy Versus XIII does not appear at E3

OCT 2008
During Tokyo Game Show the *Versus XIII* protagonist is revealed and named Noctis

JUN 2009
Versus XIII absent from E3

DEC 2009
FFXIII released in Japan

MAR 2010
FFXIII released throughout rest of the world

JAN 2011
Major new *Versus XIII* trailer is released showing battle system, new characters and storyline hints. Confirmation that the game will not be released in 2011

JUL 2012
Square Enix CEO Yoichi Wada forced to deny that *Versus XIII* has been cancelled

JUN 2013
At E3 it is revealed that *Versus XIII* is now going to be *Final Fantasy XV*. Game will be released on PS4 and Xbox One, not PS3

SEP 2014
Square Enix uses Tokyo Game Show to announce that Hajime Tabata has taken over as *FFXV* director from Tetsuya Nomura. Announcement that *FFXV Episode Duscae* demo due to be released in 2015

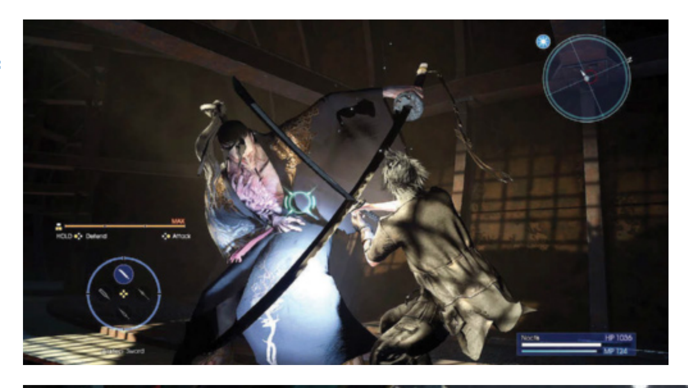
MAR 2015
Episode Duscae demo released as part of the *Final Fantasy Type-0* HD package.

JUN 2015
FFXV not at E3. Instead, updated edition of *Episode Duscae* demo is released

AUG 2015
Square Enix confirm 2016 release date for *FFXV*

JAN 2016
Tabata announces that a dedicated event will be held in March to reveal *FFXV*'s release date

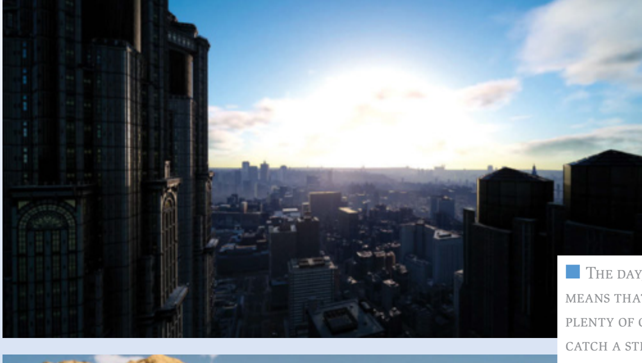
MAR 2016
During UNCOVERED: Final Fantasy XV event in LA, the game's release date is confirmed as 30 September 2016. Accompanying CGI movie and anime mini-series also confirmed

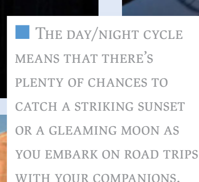






■ Having been in development for a decade it's safe to say that if *Final Fantasy XV* doesn't meet expectations then heads are likely to roll.





■ The day/night cycle means that there's plenty of chances to catch a striking sunset or a gleaming moon as you embark on road trips with your companions.



Stepping on different pressure plates causes a range of effects. You can change the weather, for instance, transform into a monster, alter the speed at which you experience the passing of time… While it's indisputably intriguing to see these ideas presented in a way over which you have free rein to influence, the concept of publicly releasing something that is lacking in cohesion (in comparison to *Episode Duscae*, at least) is sure to lead to confusion amongst those series newcomers that Tabata and company are so eager to attract. Tabata himself, however, believes that there's no issue in providing something of this nature: "I don't think that there's a problem. Really, I think [*Platinum Demo*] offers another way for people to become aware of *Final Fantasy XV* and get involved."

The demo has a very low barrier of entry for people that haven't played a *Final Fantasy* game before. You can enjoy it in a very easy and casual way, and it's aimed at people that like their games to be like that. "Before release we're going to be showing a lot more when it comes to the atmosphere of the main game and the feeling of it, so I don't think there are going to be any problems when it comes to communicating the messages we want to communicate to our fans." Considering that the original *FF* was released nearly 30 years ago, and that the series has had so many iterations since then, it's necessary to convey a strong yet clear message as to what the game will actually be taking from previous instalments.

Brotherhood and *Kingsglaive*, Tabata argues, are avenues through which the "traditional, long-term *Final Fantasy* fan" is able to absorb themselves in the new world he's creating. "*Platinum Demo* isn't the only way to define the series and conjure up an image for it; you should really be looking at the entire range of what we're creating. I personally think that it's a very good thing to give people a lot of ways into this franchise and to appeal to people with different tastes."

Releases such as the *Platinum Demo* must be careful not to provide a false impression of the full game, however. As young Noctis, the overriding tone is light, almost silly – not least thanks to the Unicorn-horned cat/fox, Carbuncle, that accompanies you and speaks through a whimsical language that only you can understand. The conceptualisation process across demo and game seem to have been very different. "Is the final tone of *Final Fantasy XV* going to be like that of *Platinum Demo*? No, is the answer," states Tabata. "It's not going to be the same. We really felt that we should have a different tone and a different feeling for Noctis' dreams as a young boy, and then something more serious when he's an adult. They will be different because of the different needs of the story.

"There will certainly be that playful tone in the full game at some points, though, in order to strike a balance with the more dramatic scenes and methods of storytelling. Getting that sensation of playfulness in there is important sometimes and I want to include that in the demo and the final game."

Engaging audiences that enjoy both a serious and more light-hearted approach applies also to the combat, which abandons the series' typically turn-based structure for something altogether more action orientated. Again, the goal is to provide what Tabata and Square Enix see as a more globalised appeal – with quicker, more immediate results from combat mirroring one of the core tenants adhered to by the majority of Western RPGs. Having systems that provide new players the "ability to get involved" without "feeling lost" is important to Tabata, and the new combat structure reflects that. Holding down the attack button causes Noctis to strike with whichever weapon you've equipped, whilst changing armament mid-combo (using the D-pad) allows you to use more varied moves in quick succession. You might, for instance, want to soften up an enemy with swift-but-weak attacks with a small sword, before pulling out a slow-but-powerful hammer to finish them off.

Throw in magic, and the reality that different enemies are more susceptible to different types of combos and weapons, and the potential for more complexity later down the line is obvious. Still, it remains doubtless that *Final Fantasy* veterans will take some convincing that the system is a superior option to something turn-based, despite pure turn-based combat not having been used in a main title for generations. Tabata hopes that the fresh combat approach will eventually appeal to new and old: "I very much consider the difference between traditional *Final Fantasy* fans and people that aren't fans. It's very important to make sure that both aspects of the audience can enjoy the game and that things are not created in a way that excludes one side or the other.

"The combat system is obviously a very important part of making sure that balance is right, so we've included systems that tune the combat system into something that's easy to get into for people that maybe are not so keen on the RPG-style of tactical battle systems. At the same time, though, there are other systems and areas that those core gamers, the people that really like to play skilfully, can enjoy and play in that way that they like. We want to appeal to both of those groups."

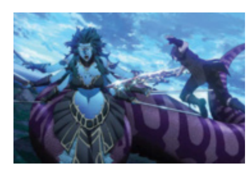
"IT'S A VERY GOOD THING TO GIVE PEOPLE A LOT OF WAYS INTO THIS FRANCHISE AND TO APPEAL TO PEOPLE WITH DIFFERENT TASTES"

To say that *FFXV* is exclusively underpinned by Western design principles is, of course, false. This is a game that continues to be constructed in Japan by Japanese designers, and it still has the weight of a franchise that is now 29 years old bearing down on it. Despite Western-made RPGs now being more synonymous with the concept of offering a vast open-world for players to explore, Tabata's initial inspiration for such an inclusion here came from a source much closer to home.

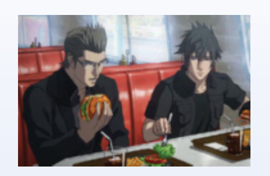
"I get a lot of inspiration from almost all open world games coming from the Western game market these days, of course," explains the director. "However, the actual inspiration for having a seamless world that you can travel through without any breaks came from, funnily enough, *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina Of Time* on Nintendo 64. That was my biggest inspiration for that idea."

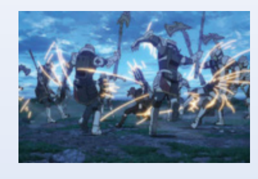
The irony of taking inspiration from a game that is now 18 years old as a means to bring to an elderly franchise back to major prominence across the world speaks to that unique duality that permeates everything about *FFXV*. It's modern, yet inspired by a classic. It wants a new audience while retaining the old. It wants to be all about the game itself, but it uses movies and anime to inform us of that. Striking all of these balances is a task that is going to require the most tender of touches, an intimate knowledge of global videogame culture and, probably, a healthy dose of luck given the volume of new ground being covered.

Despite the difficulty of the task, however, fans are unlikely to be understanding if the final release is anything other than as close to perfect as can be reasonably expected. When you make your audience wait for over a decade, patience and forgiveness tend to be hard to find and no quantity of anime is going to fix that.



■ *Brotherhood: Final Fantasy XV* is a five-part web miniseries that you can begin watching right now for free on Square Enix's YouTube channel. It chronicles the back story of Noctis from his childhood up to the events of the new game. Episode two is due in June.





■ The last chapter of this animated series is scheduled to be published 30 September 2016, on the same day as the launch of *Final Fantasy XV* worldwide. Hopefully the story will hold our attention until then and keep our interest piqued.

The trials of KICKSTARTER success

GETTING A CROWDFUNDED PAYDAY ISN'T AS EASY AS YOU MIGHT IMAGINE. **WE CHAT WITH THE DEVELOPERS AND THE HEAD OF GAMES FOR KICKSTARTER** TO DISCOVER THE REWARDS AND PITFALLS BEYOND THE MONEY



7,458
SUCCESSFULLY FUNDED GAME PROJECTS

"Nearly anyone with a computer can walk in out of the cold and start a project and fund it," Kickstarter's head of games, Luke Crane, reveals to us. That's both the great appeal of Kickstarter and the weakest point in its armour, but overall, as the launching pad for indie titles and the rejuvenation of veteran developer careers, it's been a force for good in the industry. As a spotlight on the way developers are organised and how they both accrue and spend money, it's often been a magnifying glass on the darker sectors of gaming. Kickstarter tries not to get too involved. "The criteria for actually being able to launch on the platform are quite small. You basically have to follow a few rules: it has to be a creative project, it has to create something to share with others and you can't have guns or porn or whatever in the project. Otherwise, so long as it's a game or something game-related that you're creating to share with other people then you're good to go."

We're now at a point down the road where Kickstarter-funded projects are commonplace, but that doesn't mean they don't throw up the odd surprise or even catch developers napping when they attempt to make use of the platform. Having seen records broken last year by titles like *Shenmue III*, *Bloodstained: Ritual Of The Night* and *Yooka-Laylee*, now seemed like a good time to reflect on the impact of the service, what it takes to be successful and the potential pitfalls we're infrequently exposed to from the developer side.

"The trailblazers, the pioneers, the Double Fines and Obsidians had to jump into the dark. We were able to look at a lot of their crowdfunding and see how from conception to the game coming out, how the audience reacted to that," Andy Robinson, editorial and comms manager at Playtonic tells us. Robinson joined the Playtonic team specifically to help the launch of *Yooka-Laylee*, its spiritual successor to the *Banjo-Kazooie* franchise. The crowdfunding campaign proved hugely successful, breaking £1,000,000 in a day and totally nearly £2,100,000 at close as fans flocked to the new title.

"That's not a new story either," Crane tells us. "That's what kicked off the boom in 2012. All these killer B's, which is what we call them. Not triple-A design studios and not complete one-man shop studios. People who have been working in the industry for 20 or 30 years using Kickstarter to tap directly into their fanbase and serve them. That narrative continues and grows in 2015 with *Yooka-Laylee*, *Bloodstained* and *Shenmue*."

It's not just mid-sized studios or talented but marginalised developers who have benefitted from Kickstarter in recent years, however. Creators such as *Fist Of Awesome*'s Nicoll Hunt, a fine example of what Crane referred to as one-man studios, found Kickstarter to be an amazing launchpad for an eccentric idea. "I thought it would be fun to make a game about a heavily bearded man punching bears in the face to save humanity and that's *Fist Of Awesome*," he explains to us. "The main thing that drew me to [Kickstarter] – plus the money part of it, obviously, meaning I could buy much better development hardware and software – the thing that drew me to it was the fact that people would be personally invested in what I was creating. As an indie developer, as a very, very small developer with no marketing budget to speak of that was very appealing to me. That I could have a group of people who were, hopefully, as excited about the game as I was."

> "KILLER B'S IS WHAT WE CALL THEM. NOT TRIPLE-A DESIGN STUDIOS AND NOT COMPLETE ONE-MAN SHOP STUDIOS"

As time has gone on, the broader social and marketing appeal of Kickstarter has almost taken over whatever financial reward might be garnered from the platform, which is something that Crane doesn't seem too worried by. "You set your money goal, your time goal, you throw in a description and some rewards and you're good to go. That's the core of it, but what people do within that, anywhere from last year with *Exploding Kittens* kind of having a 30-day party on Kickstarter to one of my favourite projects on Kickstarter last year, *Battletech* by the Harebrained Schemes people who did a great job of interacting with their fanbase and serving them throughout the 30 days. Things have definitely changed and continue to change over the last few years."

It's also helped to put smaller projects on the map and attract attention from publishers, which it could be argued goes against the spirit of what Kickstarter seems to be all about. Again Crane acknowledges this has happened, but isn't too concerned. "I've seen



23,274
GAME PROJECTS LAUNCHED

The biggest challenge even successful campaigns seem to hit is making sure backers are happy with how things are progressing and getting rewards sent out in an orderly manner. It turns out sending T-shirts is a lot of work.

SUCCESS ON A BUDGET

HOW MUCH MONEY DID SUCCESSFUL GAMING KICKSTARTERS ASK FOR?







570	RAISED LESS THAN **$1,000**
2,904	**$1,000 – $9,999**
1,361	**$10,000 – $19,999**
1,947	**$20,000 – $99,999**
614	**$100,000 – $999,999**
62	**$1,000,000** OR MORE



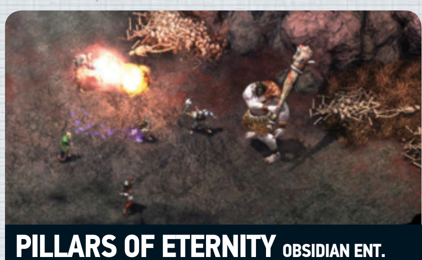


The success of developers with a proven track record, such as the makers of *Shenmue* or *Yooka-Laylee*, has given once marginalised genres another stab at relevancy.

KICKSTARTER WINNERS AND LOSERS

THE BIG SUCCESSES AND BIG FLOPS ON THE CROWDFUNDING SITE

BIG WINNERS



PILLARS OF ETERNITY OBSIDIAN ENT.

RAISED: $3,986,929 **METACRITIC AVG:** 89

Thanks to fantastic support on Kickstarter, Obsidian was able to give the isometric fantasy RPG a breath of life last year and in so doing created one of the best titles we'd played in a while. It was yet more proof that with the right team and an underserved fanbase you can create something great together.



WASTELAND 2 INXILE ENTERTAINMENT

RAISED: $2,933,252 **METACRITIC AVG:** 81

How long had it been since the last *Wasteland*, since original *Fallout* fans had to wait for the post-apocalypse to get its classic isometric look back? With those two questions in mind, the inXile team (many of whom worked on both those original games) were able to garner a lot of attention and make a great sequel.



ELITE: DANGEROUS FRONTIER DEVELOPMENTS

RAISED: £1,578,316 **METACRITIC AVG:** 80

Helping to launch the renaissance of space exploration games, the return of *Elite* had been long in the making and it really felt as if the Kickstarter push was the last thing it needed to get over the top. Continued support for the game will ultimately decide whether it was a nostalgic trip or a future classic.

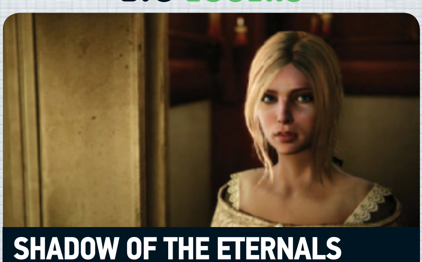
BIG LOSERS



RED ASH

RAISED: $519,999 **SHORT OF GOAL BY:** 35%

With *Mighty No. 9* still in development and Keiji Inafune committing to other projects such as *ReCore* for Xbox One, there seemed to be a lot of suspicion around this spiritual follow-up to *Mega Man Legends* series. It didn't help that even before the end of the campaign a publisher was announced.



SHADOW OF THE ETERNALS

RAISED: $323,950 **SHORT OF GOAL BY:** 57%

From the makers of *Eternal Darkness*, this game had a couple of stabs at Kickstarter and failed both times. The original asked for $1.35 million, but was cancelled. A second attempt asked for less, but ill feeling towards lead development figure Denis Dyack as well as other bad press saw this collapse quickly.



LORE

RAISED: $2,671 **SHORT OF GOAL BY:** 98%

One of the more amusing failed game campaigns, *Lore*'s Kickstarter profile was riddled with spelling and grammatical errors, not to mention some pretty poor concept art and rendering. The promise was of a game inspired by *Dark Souls* and *Diablo*, but the pitch proved unconvincing.

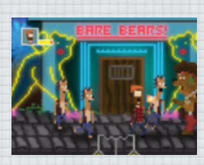
APPROXIMATELY

52%

OF KICKSTARTER GAME PROJECTS FAIL BEFORE REACHING

40%

OF THEIR FUNDING GOAL







Fist Of Awesome is a great example of how a great idea with a modest budget can get amazing support through Kickstarter and launch a gaming career into a new era. Nicoll Hunt has two new games in production.

campaigns hit the mark and then get picked up by a publisher. I've seen campaigns on track to hit their goal and then find a publisher, get a different offer and go with that instead of crowd-funding. I don't think I've seen that cynically done, though. You know, one of the great things about Kickstarter is that it's this ecosystem. It's not just us; there's a lot of different ways to get money to make a game. Whether you're doing it yourself or through a publisher, you're raising venture or whatever, I think that's good. It's good for everyone that there are all these options. Each developer, each team can really consider what the best option is for them. Sometimes Kickstarter is *not* the best option, and we're totally cool with that."

Some developers have struggled to find the right answer though, under and overestimating the response they might get from backers, offering too little information or sometimes even too much. *Yooka-Laylee* chose early on to go with full transparency to make sure fans were assured that this project they would care a great deal about was being handled appropriately. "Perception and reality can be muddled up in that way, so we made sure we weren't just slapping up pretend concept art, we showed the game up and running and listed every single person on the dev team, their experience and that they were proven on their record," Robinson explains. However, reflecting now having seen such great success, he's not sure it was entirely the correct approach. "In hindsight, we might have done things differently, but we went all in and we showed everything that we had. So, that puts us in a position now where we're making this big project, it's not a little side-scrolling game or anything like that, it's a big 3D, beautiful platformer that our fans and anyone who is used to Kickstarter projects, they want to see more stuff."

Revealing so much, in the name of openness, means that what follows can seem like months of silence, even if the team is incredibly busy working on the game. "You also have to make difficult decisions as well where you have to protect your creative team. Sometimes it's good for guys like that to be able to fail and change their minds and experiment, and it makes it difficult when you're showing stuff," Robinson adds.

Ultimately anything involving money has a tendency to cause rancour, no matter how good the intentions or honest the execution – and the history of Kickstarter projects doesn't always help. "Maybe not so much now, but certainly in the past there would be people who asked for a certain amount of money that was clearly not enough to make the game that they claimed they were going to be able to make and then if they got just the goal they were completely screwed, because there's no way you can make, say, an MMO for $50,000," says Hunt, who looked at practically every gaming Kickstarter project available before launching his own in order to learn what did and didn't work on the platform.

One of things that sometimes caught out early adopters was not factoring in the cost of all of the rewards that were promised. These days, according to our experts, it's more about factoring in the time. "Financially it was fine, but I spent a good few weekends just signing my name over and over again and trying to think of weird things to write in Christmas cards," Hunt reveals. "It almost makes me grateful that it wasn't hugely successful. One of my friends had a Kickstarter campaign for *Throw Trucks With Your Mind* and it was very successful and he had an incredible amount of work moving the physical goods out of the door. Hundreds and hundreds of boxes."

"To give you an example, we spent all day yesterday in a meeting dedicated to how we're going to send stuff out," adds Robinson. "By agreeing to take this huge amount of money from Kickstarter you're essentially deciding that you're going to become a retail business. I'm in the process now of sending 6,000 T-shirts, we've got to sit down and hand sign 750 game manuals and mail them out by hand. It's a huge, huge endeavour, as you can imagine."

Proving successful on Kickstarter ultimately requires a unique balance of pitching a game people want to play, one that they think you can actually finish, and one that they think will reach the funding goal you've set. If it's not interesting enough, we won't back it. If we don't think the developer could finish it even if we did back it, why would we bother supporting it? And if the funding goal set looks insufficient to make the game, we're naturally distrustful of it. Robinson admits it's a challenging scenario at the best of times to establish that trust in the project. "It's a difficult position when you're asking for people's money with a promise that you're then going to go and do something. For whatever reason, if you don't hit that, there's going to be a lot of people going, 'You've lied to us', or 'You've done a fast one on us'. But the reality is that not a lot of people understand crowdfunding because it's new – and when you decide to crowdfund a game, that doesn't mean you've made your life easier."

> "YOU'RE ESSENTIALLY DECIDING THAT YOU'RE GOING TO BECOME A RETAIL BUSINESS"

But patterns are beginning to emerge and models for success are becoming clearer. As head of games at Kickstarter, Crane has a great vantage point from which to see these things manifest. "There are certain retro pixel platformers, or the *Zelda*-likes… those did well for a while. The isometric RPGs, *Wasteland*, *Shadowrun*, there were a bunch of those that did well. Point-and-click adventures, there was a spate of those. It comes in waves. Right now, in the last year or so, the one that's surprised us are visual novels, these kind of animated stories where you pick the path of the characters. There have been some surprising successes there, these projects coming out of nowhere. Clearly they're speaking to an under-served fan base, speaking directly to them and doing quite well from it."

And if there's a *secret* on Kickstarter it might well be finding that underserved group of fans or a genre that we've been missing out on for a while. "Trying to target making the next *Angry Birds* or *Clash Of Clans*, the next *Bubble Bobble Saga* or whatever they're called, I don't see any appeal in that," adds Hunt. "You're just trying to appeal to this huge, massive audience and if you do that you'll probably end up achieving nothing because that's what everyone is trying to do. If you target a niche and something you're passionate about personally you're much more likely to have more success. Even though the potential market is technically smaller the actual reach is much larger."



Shenmue III broke all kinds of records when it launched on Kickstarter last year, but it was not without controversy over the way in which it was securing additional funding and how much of the game could actually be completed.

15,232

UNSUCCESSFULLY FUNDED GAME PROJECTS

33%

OF KICKSTARTER GAME PROJECTS REACH THEIR FUNDING GOAL



Breaking out on Kickstarter as a one-person studio is probably a little harder now than it used to be since many larger indie outfits with deeper pockets and more resources are able to create flashier campaigns.


Luke Crane, head of games, Kickstarter


Andy Robinson, editorial and comms manager, Playtonic


Nicoll Hunt, creator of *Fist Of Awesome*

7 TIPS FOR KICKSTARTER SUCCESS

WE ASK THE EXPERTS WHAT IT TAKES TO CLOSE A SUCCESSFUL PROJECT ON THE PLATFORM

1 BE READY TO WORK FOR IT

"My number one tip would be to be aware of how much work it is. Not just running the thing, but afterwards. When I was hired I effectively had to have about three jobs. One to do before, one to do during the Kickstarter and one to do afterwards. I came in to write the game and my full-time job during the Kickstarter was to run that Kickstarter. It is a full-time job. It wasn't just me, either. I think it pretty much stalled everyone because I would have art guys making assets for me to put on the Kickstarter and then other guys to help with the data."
ANDY ROBINSON, EDITORIAL AND COMMS MANAGER, PLAYTONIC

2 BE PASSIONATE ABOUT YOUR GAME

"If you want to put a project on Kickstarter, make it a project that you desperately care about, where you can show that passion in the work that you produce and how you talk about the campaign. People will respond well to seeing people who want to achieve something and they'll want to help them on their way. That's the biggest thing: showing your passion and wearing it on your sleeve."
NICOLL HUNT, CREATOR OF FIST OF AWESOME

3 SET A REASONABLE GOAL

"You want to set your goal somewhere where your hardcore fans can look at it and think 'Okay, we can do that, we can hit that. That's a good goal, that makes sense to me.' You also want them to think 'Okay, they need my help' for you to hit your goal. 'We can do it, but we all need to do it together.' There's a weird psychology about hitting that goal."
LUKE CRANE, HEAD OF GAMES, KICKSTARTER

4 BE TRANSPARENT

"It would be wrong of us not to make one of our tips 'be transparent'. People who play games are savvy, they're not stupid and they are at their most cynical when you are asking them for money for something that does not exist. They can smell bullshit from a million miles away most of the time… It would have been easy for us to show some drawings of what the final game would look like and just ask for money, but we thought that was wrong. We showed the game and we invited people in and we tried to be as transparent as we possibly could. That's something that I think is right to do."
ANDY ROBINSON, EDITORIAL AND COMMS MANAGER, PLAYTONIC

5 BRING YOUR FANS WITH YOU

"You need to invite your community to support you in making this thing. It's *possible* to just launch and be 'Everybody! Check this out!' and to then be successful, but that's like winning the lottery. Even the smaller indie creators that I have seen, most of them start with a small community of supporters, friends, fans, people that have been watching the game being developed."
LUKE CRANE, HEAD OF GAMES, KICKSTARTER

6 AND MAKE SURE YOU KEEP THEM INVOLVED

"Some of the things I thought [others] did very well, on *Bloodstained* for instance, was having incredible community engagement. One of the downsides of our success was that we had used up everything on day one. I think we hit all of our stretch goals in two days. It was like, 'What do we do now?'. So, as you can imagine our funding spiked and then flatlined. Whereas you look at the stuff the other big Kickstarters are doing and they have a lot of community engagement and unlockable stuff based on how many tweets and vines they have. The audience seems to react to that really strongly. Like, if we receive 100 pieces of fan art this week, you'll unlock another level of this stretch goal castle and that kind of stuff."
ANDY ROBINSON, EDITORIAL AND COMMS MANAGER, PLAYTONIC

7 IT HAS TO BE A GOOD IDEA!

"The last part of it too, the ultimate lightning in the bottle, is that you've got to have a good idea! Right? [laughs] Even if it's a dumb idea, for your fans and supporters it's got to be something that makes them go 'Yes! This is great!' And that's the hardest part."
LUKE CRANE, HEAD OF GAMES, KICKSTARTER

> "IF YOU WANT TO PUT A PROJECT ON KICKSTARTER, MAKE IT A PROJECT THAT YOU DESPERATELY CARE ABOUT, WHERE YOU CAN SHOW THAT PASSION IN THE WORK THAT YOU PRODUCE AND HOW YOU TALK ABOUT THE CAMPAIGN"



WHY I ♥...

HALO 3

MARTIN FIELD, ART MANAGER, NDREAMS

A game that I love? It has got to be from the Halo *series. I find it so compelling that Bungie is able to tell a story in a genre that could have been considered so horribly dudebro throughout the entire thing – with all of these space marines everywhere – but the team always made such an effort to tell a story with every episode, I love it. The one I love the most though, that probably has to be* Halo 3*. I played* Halo 2 *more; but the way that Bungie ended things with 3, who doesn't love a cliff-hanger?*

"I find it so compelling that Bungie is able to tell a story in a genre that could have been considered so horribly dudebro"

MARTIN FIELD, ART MANAGER, NDREAMS


TRAXUS
HEAVY INDUSTRIES
THIS END UP

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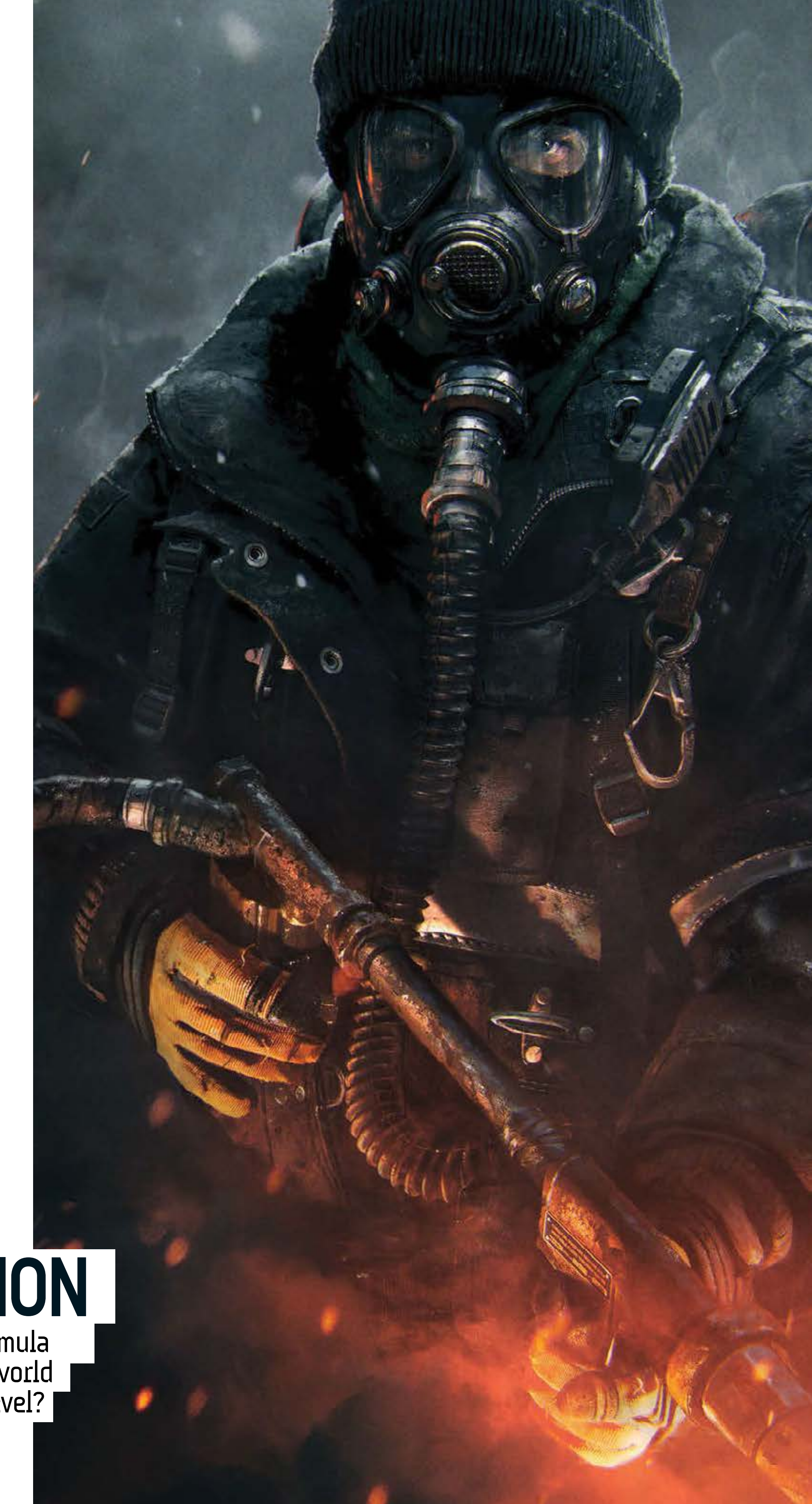
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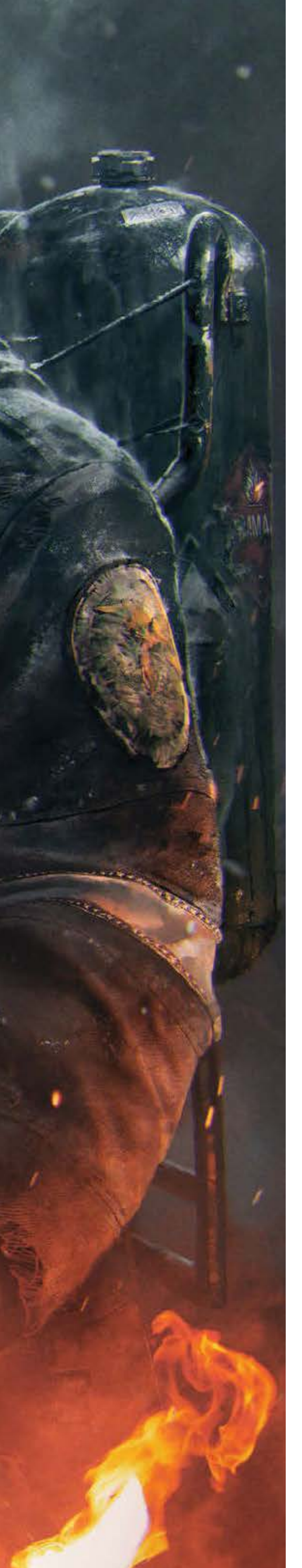
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THE DIVISION

Has Ubisoft found the formula to take persistent, open-world mulitiplayer to the next level?



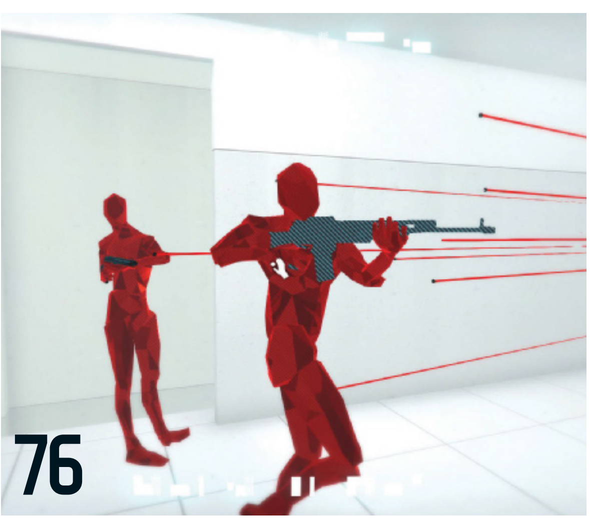
THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists, designed to enlighten, inform, and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.

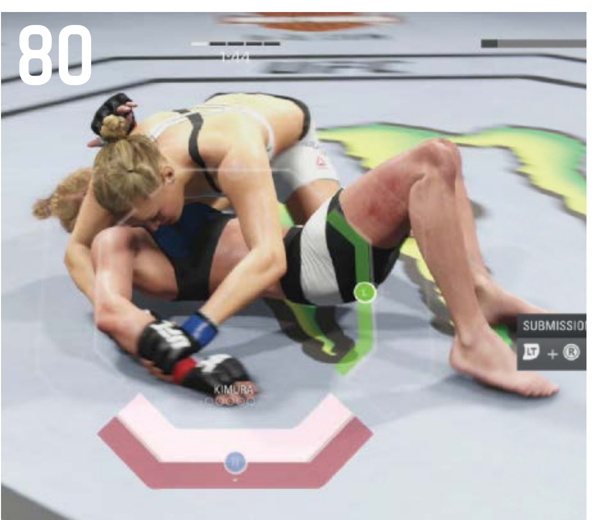












AGREE/DISAGREE?

games™ is always right. But that doesn't stop some people disagreeing. Think we've got a review horribly wrong? Or did we nail it?

Let us know through the following channels:

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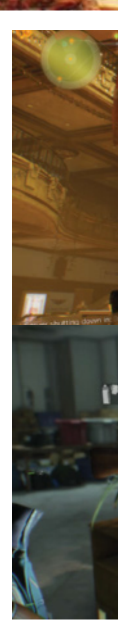
 gplus.to/gamesTMmagazine

THE FEAR OF ANOTHER PLAYER TURNING ON YOU IS REAL, BUT IT DOESN'T HAPPEN AS FREQUENTLY AS YOU MIGHT IMAGINE

A LITTLE REPETITION

While the main story missions offer great variety and interesting environments, some of the lesser encounters on the streets of New York can get a bit repetitive. The city itself is wonderfully diverse with each district having some small element that helps it stand out from the next, but thugs on the street are much the same on every corner. Dialogue has little variation and even the AI tends to behave in more or less the same way every time. Smaller encounters and resources missions can also feel repetitive as you work through similar looking sewer networks or samey rooftops to reach your goal. Even the NPCs that wander the streets become rather familiar, with only a small number of character models and set routines to play out. It serves to break the immersion, which is a shame.







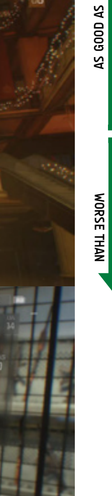
UNITED WE STAND

Tom Clancy's The Division

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, PC
ORIGIN: Sweden
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: Ubisoft Massive
PRICE: £44.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: Massively Multiplayer
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Left: *The Division* isn't always as dynamic around cover as it could be, as you can find yourself shooting railings that should be easy to avoid. Likewise, some environmental elements can be an annoyance as you get caught on curbs or boxes in the street.




DESTINY


GRAND THEFT AUTO V

Left: Modding weapons and gear in the menus is time-consuming but fascinating, made simpler by some smart navigational tools such as being able to instantly compare stats and mark items for sale/ junking to craft with later.

So, what next? That's the question that hangs over every persistent online gaming experience and that is once again the question that players of *The Division* will be left with as they reach the Level 30 cap. But unlike many games that have sought to blend the MMO with more accessible experiences, Ubisoft has created a template for a world that feels far better placed to answer that repeated question time after time.

This is in no small part thanks to this being one of the most impressive and immersive open world settings we've ever seen. Ubisoft Massive's vision of a lawless New York midtown is fascinating and chilling. The streets and buildings are packed with details, environmental stories, areas to discover and things to explore. We constantly found ourselves sidetracked on the way to a mission by an alley that looked promising, or a looted pharmacy that might hide some resources of interest. Not to mention the civilians hanging out of windows to yell at you from time to time, the recreations of famous landmarks and buildings, the graffiti on the walls… the spirit of this city is here and the way in which it morphs and evolves from district to district, becoming more chaotic towards the central Dark Zone area, is environmental storytelling at its best.

And frankly, *The Division* is far more atmospheric than an open-world experience has a right to be. The day/night cycle and the weather effects combine to create some stunning scenes on the streets of Manhattan. Stalking through a snow storm, visibility reduced by fog, every flickering light could be the sign of an enemy at hand. Sure, you can use a quick Pulse ability to reveal who is nearby, but the way in which these moments capture the feel of a city in the midst of mass panic and lawlessness is truly sublime. There's an element of the old west about your role here too, enforcing the law as judge, jury and executioner, protecting civilians and gradually seeking to bring order to the city. This is one of the best renditions of New York we've ever seen.

But then we almost expect that from Ubisoft titles at this point. Whatever the gameplay or technical flaws of recent triple-A releases, we're not sure anyone would argue that its visions of revolutionary Paris, near-future Chicago or Victorian London were lacking in detail or intrigue. In this and many other ways, *The Division* feels like the culmination of a project Ubisoft as a publisher has been working towards for many years. It has the open world of *Assassin's Creed* or *Watch Dogs*, the styling and visual features of modern *Splinter Cell*, much of the combat of *Ghost Recon* and so on. This is a showcase for many of the ways its various studios have been advancing their respective genres and Massive has brought it all together into one pleasing whole.

WORLDWIDE
TAKING GAMING ONLINE

FAINT PRAISE: It seems strange that we would feel the need to praise a game for releasing without game-breaking issues, but the smooth online functionality has been a refreshing change.

That's a lot to juggle, but *The Division* manages to strike through the middle and forge a path and feel of its own. It's a marriage of massively multiplayer, loot-driven RPG with tactical, third-person shooter, *Tom Clancy* gameplay. It's not always a happy marriage, as we'll begin to break down in a moment, but for the most part it works very well indeed. There's an instant accessibility to the exploration and basic gameplay that makes *The Division* a very easy game to lose yourself in for a few hours, just walking the streets and shooting looters in the head as you pass them by.

Which touches on a slight issue of disconnect we experienced as we thinned out the numbers of looters and rioters again and again; as we came across thieves picking at the belongings of the dead in the streets, we couldn't help but note the irony that we were doing much the same with their remains once we had dispatched them. Besides governmental authority, we're not given many compelling reasons for believing we're justified in killing these men besides the fact that our crosshairs turn red when we hover over them. There was a chance here to play with the moral ambiguity of a city under martial law that just wasn't used to its full advantage.

And just as these low level adversaries don't feel particularly well-rounded, so the larger threat can feel a little weightless at times. The

three factions that have been terrorising and taking control of the city offer some small variations in challenge (the flame-happy Cleaners being an interesting tactical challenge at times), but they lack a developed leader to chase. The gang structure of a game such as *Crackdown* managed to deliver sprawling open world freedom with a sense that there were key figures you needed to target, but while *The Division* leans on Manhattan being an intelligence black hole where you must piece together the events that have unfolded before your arrival and dismantle the hostile forces that have accrued, it doesn't do so in a pointed, motivational way.

In this sense it's leaning a little more heavily towards its MMO influences, not wanting to bog players down in narrative and cutscenes – an intention that should be commended – but it's a difficult balance. Massive has stuck tightly to the middle ground between MMO and shooter and that has benefits and pitfalls. In places it doesn't quite grasp enough from either side to make something truly amazing. On the RPG side it could do with a little more variety in its loot for instance, with exotic drops that really stand out, particularly when you reach the level cap. And on the other side, it just lacks a little of the minutiae of a classic *Tom Clancy* game. Stealth isn't really an option as silencers on your weapons just lower your threat level, reducing the amount of aggro you pull when you're playing as part of a team. Handy for sure, but not very *Clancy*. Likewise, there's no crouching or going prone. These feel like classic features from this brand of games that haven't made the cut in *The Division* and it's only odd because the core appears to be there to make them possible. For solo players they would also be a huge help.

But what we're really talking about in highlighting these shortcomings is just adding more elements, not changing the fundamentals of what Massive has made. More options, more gameplay choices, more loot. It's adding some additional flavour to the pot rather than changing the dish and that speaks to the quality of what's here. As we've mentioned, working your way through Manhattan as a heavily armed sightseer has its pleasures, and discovering the smaller moments of the game, such as lost agent files, phone recordings and the visually enticing Echoes help to tell you a story of a broken city. It can be very touching.

And then there are the missions, the real meat of the game. Every main story mission feels unique not only in terms of its target and location, but also its pacing and character. Finding contaminated dollar bills in a shopping mall is a mad dash around burning building, gradually putting out fires to open up new areas and ultimately shooting your way out to escape. Another battle through a napalm production facility is a stop/start gun battle with tanks to blow up as you go, leading to a multi-storey shootout. In these locations the menace of the enemy is clearer, your objective focused and the challenge apparent. Taking on some of these missions alone, at least when you're at or close to the recommended level, can be supremely difficult, but rewarding. Unlike playing online missions alone in *Grand Theft Auto Online*, for example, you can tell that these stages have been crafted in the knowledge that players might want to play them alone. It's hard, but not a chore.

FAQs

Q. IS IT AS GOOD-LOOKING AS THOSE E3 DEMOS?
It's pretty close, yeah. We certainly wouldn't call it bad looking.

Q. IS IT ACTUALLY ANYTHING LIKE DESTINY?
Only in terms of the way it handles interaction between players. This is a very different kind of gaming experience.

Q. IS THAT GARRUS FROM MASS EFFECT I KEEP HEARING?
Yes! Brandon Keener, the voice of everyone's favourite turian sniper is the man behind ISAC, your AI companion.



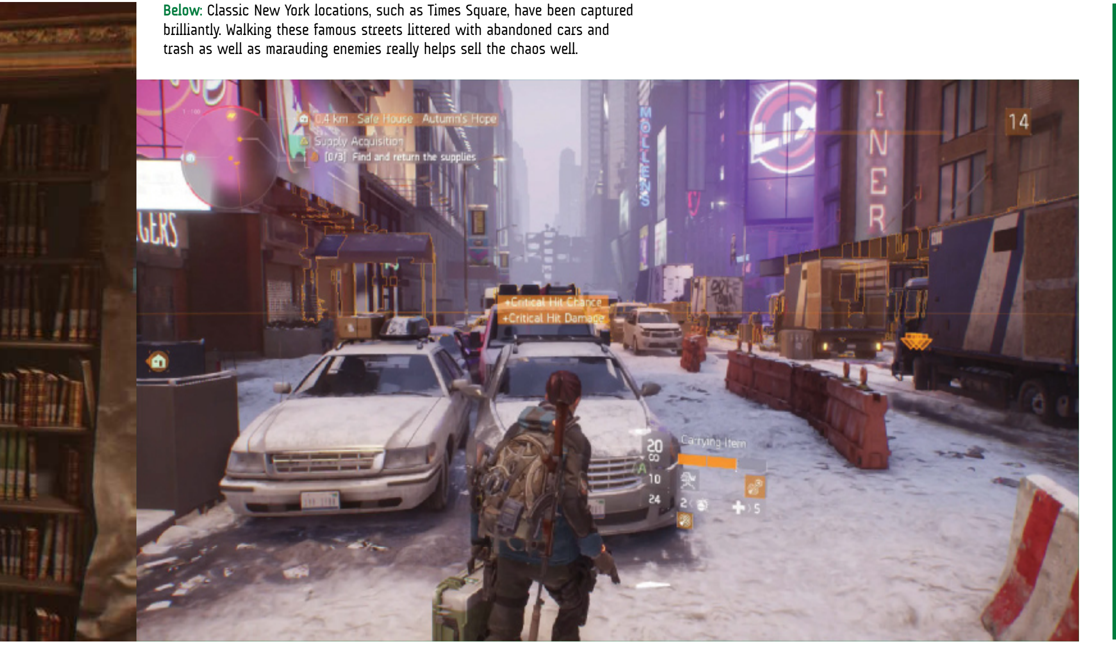
Right: It was pleasing to discover that each of the Safe Houses you can unlock as launching pads for your exploration of Manhattan – for restocking gear and finding companions – are unique in design and mood as if a pre-existing space really has been taken over.



Above: Your first venture into the Dark Zone is one filled with dread. The enemies in here are tougher, their numbers more numerous and your colleagues hard to trust. It will be interesting to see how this area evolves in the coming months.

THERE'S AN ELEMENT OF THE OLD WEST ABOUT YOUR ROLE HERE TOO, ENFORCING THE LAW AS JUDGE, JURY AND EXECUTIONER

Below: Classic New York locations, such as Times Square, have been captured brilliantly. Walking these famous streets littered with abandoned cars and trash as well as marauding enemies really helps sell the chaos well.

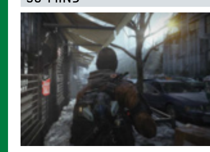




TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

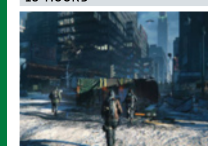
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

30 MINS



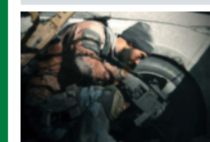
So far, so basic in Brooklyn. We're heading off to Manhattan, but nothing is really jumping out at us yet. Standard shooter fair.

10 HOURS



Wandering around aimlessly and finding so much to do. This game is packed with distractions. And the guns. So many interesting guns!

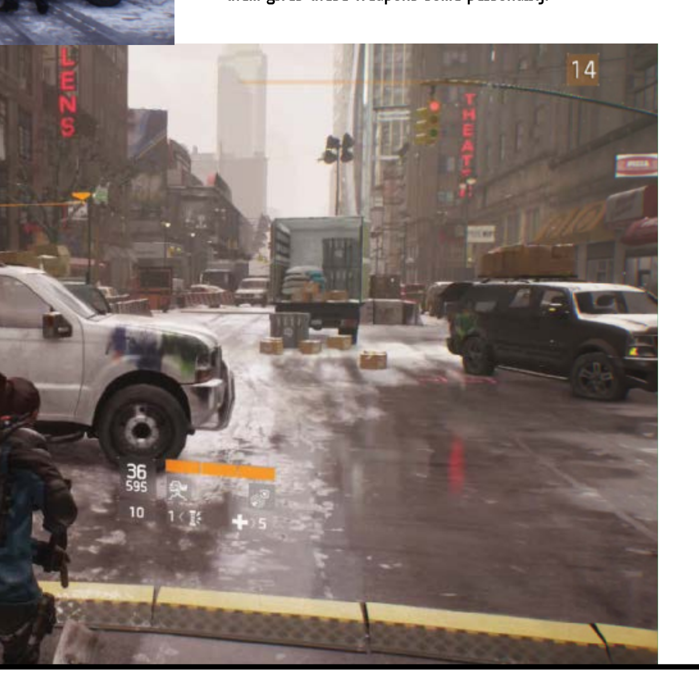
7 DAYS



The Dark Zone is the final frontier to conquer. The rewards are great, but the risks are even greater. This is a terrifying place.

A GUN WITH PERSONALITY

For a game set more or less within a contemporary world with realistic weapons we were pleased to find that every single one of them had a very different feel, even within the same class. *The Division* doesn't quite have the depth of fun weapons that *Destiny* or *Borderlands* have offered, but the difference between an M4 Assault Rifle and an AK-47 is noticeable. Moreover, the difference between a standard weapon and one equipped with various buffs and effects is striking. There's a real thrill in finding a shiny new weapon out in the field and having the chance to test it out. The sound, recoil and rate of fire between these weapons make a real difference to your experience with them. The stats may look incremental, but the application of them gives these weapons some personality.



Playing with others – friends or strangers – is clearly the optimum way to experience the game, of course. Those story missions breeze past with comrades and new tactical elements begin to emerge. Being allowed to switch your equipped skills on the fly means you can quickly adjust to fill the gaps in your team's arsenal. If you've specialised in heavy armour and health you can act as a tank and take the punishment being thrown out while a turret acts as crowd control and a silenced weapon can be used to pick off stragglers without drawing too much attention. Bosses drop to their knees in the face of triangulated gunfire and the smart use of grenades to slow their movement. It's all very fluid and adaptable, freeing you up to play around with some different styles before settling on a loadout and approach you prefer, if you ever choose to settle on one.

In the later stages of the game, as the difficulty rises, having some level of communication with your team is recommended. New players should know that joining a high-level friend might prove too much; enemies are scaled depending on the levels of the players involved and how many there are of you, but you will find yourself levelling up faster as a result.

And then there's the Dark Zone, a very intimidating and curious place that really feels like the biggest experiment of *The Division*. While it was always talked up broadly as the PvP zone of the game, it's not really structured to act that way. This is rather an even more intense and atmospheric portion of the map with enemies that are even greater bullet sponges, with more challenging AI routines and potentially greater rewards if you can get them extracted. The fear of another player turning on you is real, but not as frequent as you might imagine. The threat of becoming a rogue agent and having a bounty placed on you seems to have scared many off from attempting this move, even if it means stripping other players of their gear. Right now it's rather chaotic and amorphous, but it's the area of *The Division* that has the most potential for expansion and augmentation post launch.

MISSING LINK

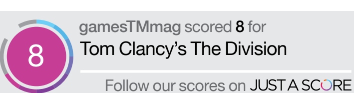
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

HOT DROPS: As *The Division* often leans on realism there aren't any of the truly exotic weapon varieties that you might see in other loot-driven games and that's a shame.

And that might some up much of our early experience, big and disparate, but enjoyable and with great promise. The question that still hangs in the air is: what next? *The Division* will expand and grow, and how that's handled will ultimately prove the true worth of Ubisoft Massive's game, much as we've seen with *Destiny*, but what's here right now is thoroughly engaging. With more time, it could have done a great deal more and found more depth that would serve it well for the future, but what it has done is impressive and, most importantly, a lot of fun to play.

VERDICT

THE CORE IS EXCELLENT, BUT IT COULD BE MUCH MORE





GROUNDHOG DAY FOR PSYCHOPATHS

Hitman

Above: Mechanically, *Hitman* functions largely like *Absolution* before it with many of the game's systems weaving together to give you creative freedom in how you approach assassination opportunities. That said, the animations could be largely improved as development continues.

What is it that compels a criminal to return to the scene of a crime? There's an air of arrogance to it, right? The opportunity to watch as hapless investigators struggle to follow the trail of (cold) blood towards a lead. Perhaps it's seen as a chance to monitor missed opportunities, the window to see what could have been were more attention to detail paid. Maybe, just maybe, there's simply a desire to heartlessly revel in the chaos created by their hand.

Whatever the reason, it could feel like a redundant act if you *knew* with absolute certainty that the perfect crime had been committed. Is there really any need to return to the scene after you've successfully masqueraded as a vampire magician at a swanky fashion show, poisoning the party juice of two hapless marks and slipping away into the shadows without any one of the hundreds of guests being aware of you at all?

That's a problem you'll routinely find yourself butting your head against in *Hitman* (2016), IO Interactive's sixth instalment into the long running franchise. Because IO has purposefully avoided releasing a full game experience here, instead opting to separate the game into 'episodes' that are scheduled to release periodically throughout the year – each one a chapter into a larger (and seemingly mundane) overarching narrative.

That means you're going to find yourself replaying the same level over and over again for weeks at a time while you wait for new content. IO has essentially created *Groundhog Day* for psychopaths; with Bill Murray replaced with a bald, barcode-branded assassin, naturally. If you like the idea of meticulously planning the perfect (and creative) assassination with a wealth of tools at your disposal, executing it without flaw and moving onto the next mark, well, this might not be the game for you – not right now, at any rate.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, PC
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Square Enix
DEVELOPER: IO Interactive
PRICE: £11.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

IT FEELS A LITTLE UNFINISHED, RATHER THAN BEING TRULY EPISODIC AND CONSIDERED

This is going to be a massive point of contention between *Hitman* fans, because while this might be the sixth game in the series, it's likely being held accountable against just one of its predecessors: 2006's *Hitman: Blood Money*. It became a cult hit, thanks largely to its creative assassination gameplay and methodical approach to murder simulation. IO created a sophisticated sandbox that was both approachable and ripe with creative opportunities for advantageous players; 2012's *Hitman Absolution* disappointed many fans with its sharp turn away from puzzle boxes to cinematic action.

From a design and gameplay perspective then, *Hitman* feels like a direct response to the criticism levied at IO after *Absolution*; the episodic design giving the studio the space to make fluid and impactful changes to the core product as the year continues, in theory, at least. And this is admittedly a strong start, especially for those that always saw the appeal of *Hitman*'s methodic approach to sandbox puzzle design. A quick prologue mission sets

FAQs

Q. SO, IT'S ALWAYS ONLINE?
Sadly, it is. Despite featuring very little in the way of online functionality, *Hitman* forces you online and leaves you at the mercy of its servers.

Q. HOW ARE THE ELUSIVE CONTRACTS?
The timed assassinations have already been delayed until an unspecified time in the future, not a huge vote of confidence for this release model.

Q. SHOULD I BUY HITMAN?
This first episode is a solid start, though you may want to consider holding off until more locations are available.



Below: Contracts mode returns, giving players the opportunity to create their own custom hits and share them online with the community. The offering has proven to be a mixed bag so far, but the mode shows promise.



Below: *Hitman* has some major presentational woes that also extend to the story and voice acting; one Russian General even drops his accent intermittently after meeting him.

the stage – feeling on par in terms of size and scope as previous instalments – but it's the first chapter, set in a sprawling Paris fashion party, that really steals the show.

It's larger, more impressive and more intuitively designed than any level in the series that's come before it. Despite there only being two main targets to hit in this debut episode, there's a multitude of ways to complete your objectives. Hundreds of civilians bustle from dance floor to bar, caterers weave purposefully through the crowds, all as models take to a gorgeously lit catwalk in the centre of the sprawling mansion – it's down to you to decide how you want to proceed. Unlike almost any other stealth game we've seen this generation, *Hitman* feels truly organic; the true realisation of *Blood Money*'s core concept and ambitions, only now it's built on hardware that can actually handle it.

WORLDWIDE
TAKING GAMING ONLINE

DISCONNECTED should you find yourself disconnected from the server, *Hitman* will quickly boot you off the game and lock your save behind a connection wall.

That does, of course, come at quite the price. Being that Paris is the only location you can go, the fun of *Hitman* largely depends on your patience. Repetition is a key component to this early access-meets-episodic release model, so you better hope you don't pull off the most spectacular assassination attempt on the first try. IO was seemingly aware that players may grow tired of walking the same hallways and seeing the same faces, as vibrant and impressive as they may be, and has packed the environment with items and equipment to tamper with too.

Tools – such as a crowbar or wrench – often have a specific purpose, and the game will waste no time in highlighting every little opportunity available to you at all times. It actually feels a little forced; the best *Hitman* games have never been heavy-handed in their attempts to funnel you towards specific goals, and yet this one is basically screaming out at you every few seconds. This UI nightmare, combined with the hand-holding nature of the Challenge system, ensures that the game is constantly pushing you to see every single piece of content in *Hitman* – instead of letting you discover it for yourself.

It's a fantastically clever way of masking how little there is to actually do in *Hitman*, artificially making the first chapter feel more full than it actually is. The chapter ends abruptly – we can already see problems with making the cliffhanger-centric story – and it just feels a little unfinished, rather than being truly episodic and considered. It's a big-budget Triple-A release that has been cut into bite-sized pieces, and it's a little difficult to truly gauge the value for time or money that you're receiving with *Hitman*. These concerns are only compounded by major presentational and design woes: menus are sluggish, the UI is difficult to navigate, and anything from saving to loading can take upwards of a minute.

Worse still, despite being an inherently single-player game, it's been designed to be always-online; should you find yourself disconnected from the server you'll be booted from your game and locked out from the Challenges and your save data until you re-connect. It's a baffling decision, but then nothing about this *Hitman* release is as we expected it to be. This is a solid start for IO, but it still needs to do a lot to convince us that this release model has more worth to the player than the traditional 'release a finished game' method we've grown to love and appreciate.

TWEAKING THE GAME EXPERIENCE

Agent 47 has always been a simple character, a well travelled figure of death that's geared towards a life of ruthless assassination and efficiency, though that often comes at a price of accessibility. IO Interactive has never been fantastic with introducing its systems to new players, especially as many of them overlap and rely heavily on gauging potential NPC reaction, though the studio has done its best to circumvent this here by babysitting players through the first chapter. If you really want to get a true *Hitman* experience, you'll want to dive into the menus and begin wildly disabling as many UI and informational elements as possible, otherwise you'll find yourself constantly coddled by a game that seems fearful its players may miss a creative opportunity to maim and kill.

BETTER THAN

HITMAN: ABSOLUTION

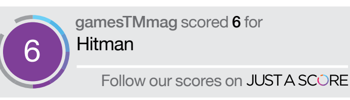




WORSE THAN

HITMAN: BLOOD MONEY

VERDICT
SOLID OPENING CHAPTER, BUT WE'RE LEFT WANTING MORE



PREPARE TO DREI

Dark Souls III

It's not a game – it's an ordeal. That's the best way to look at *Dark Souls III* if you want to cling onto your sanity until the credits roll, since FromSoftware does an excellent job of bending many typical gaming conventions in order to deliver something that will continually erect walls in the way of your progress without the dangled carrot of reward for your trouble. There's no gold star for victory, no back-patting results screen and often not even the promise of better gear for overcoming a challenge – character build variety means that maybe only a third of the stuff you find will actually be even vaguely relevant to you, with other distant sparklies inviting you to discover secret routes, survive ambushes and dance around traps only to be rewarded with, on occasion, *literal rubbish*.

From knows all too well that the exhilaration of felling a boss is its own reward, so if you go into *DSIII* expecting a game, you'll find a brutally thankless one. If you go in expecting an ordeal, a trial, a gruelling slog… well, you'll discover one that champions player skill and creativity in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds, and one that does so with a level of craftsmanship reflective of the highest points of the series to date.

It's not only quality that reminds of previous games, however. While *Demon's Souls*, *Dark Souls*, *Bloodborne* and *DSII* all exist as effectively standalone outings that follow similar themes, *Dark Souls III* is a true sequel. Item descriptions make explicit reference to the fact that you're exploring a world at least heavily inspired by *Dark Souls*, before this is made even clearer later on through several reveals that will have series fans leaping from their seats – without spoiling anything, it's safe to say that those who have played the earlier games in the series will certainly get more from *DSIII* than those that go in fresh. That said, the latter is still perfectly possible, and that From has managed to deliver something that holds up as both a standalone game and one that can give returning fans even more of a sense of purpose and closure (if this is indeed to be the last *Dark Souls*, as has been suggested) is impressive.

In terms of world design and layout, *Bloodborne* is probably the closest touchstone. Largely, areas take the form of fairly linear paths with the odd branch, and even the more open areas don't feel like they want you to explore them – one of the largest of these is a dingy, confusing swamp where the sludge both poisons and slows movement, making getting around it a chore and dealing with the deadly foes that lie in wait even more challenging. The *Bloodborne* aspect comes in the interconnected design of these areas, so while the focus might not be on fully exploring one area before moving onto the next, you'll often find a side alley in one place that leads back into a small secret area somewhere you've already visited, discovering such treats in turn unlock shortcuts for world traversal (that aren't always needed now that fast travel is unlocked at the second bonfire).

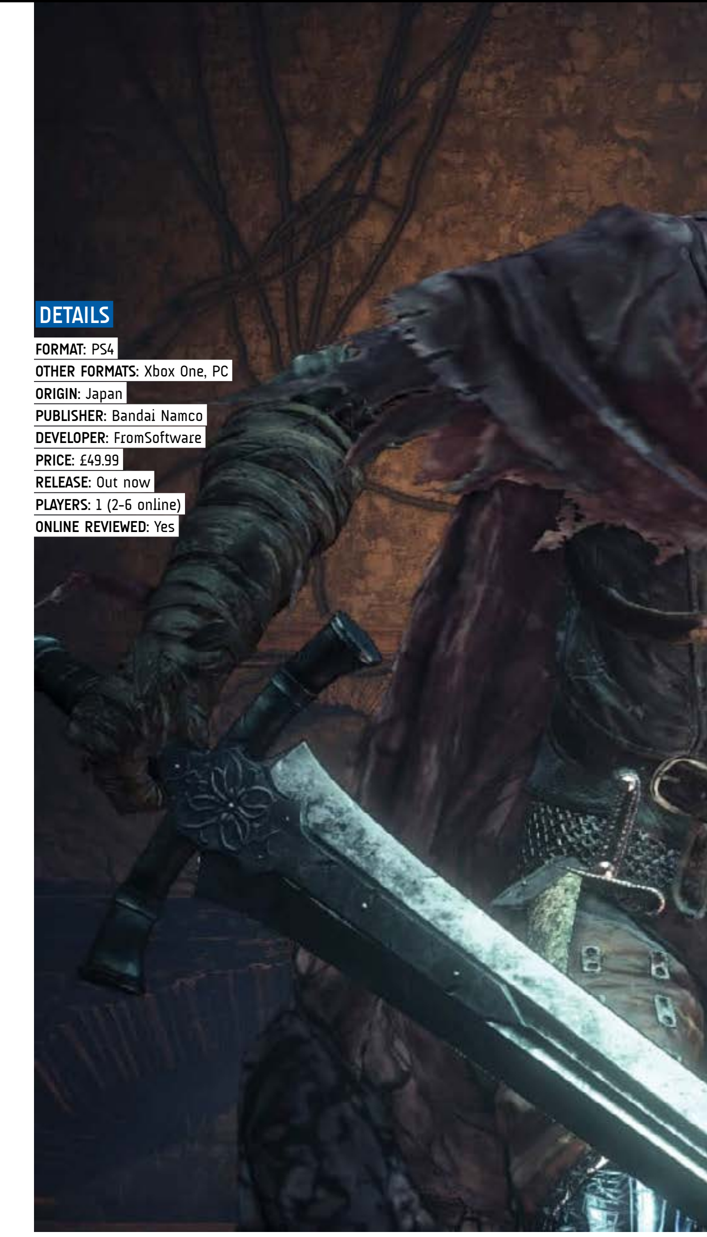
Even though the path may feel narrower than it has, you shouldn't expect to stumble across everything naturally. Experimentation and risk-taking are still very much encouraged, although you might want to wait until you're no longer Embered before throwing yourself off a cliff and hoping you survive the drop to grab the shiny prize below. Embers are the new Humanity, effectively – a way of extending your life bar via limited supply consumables (they're primarily treasure pick-ups but can also be found as extremely rare drops from enemies) or defeating bosses.

As before, the upside of not having that health bonus is that you're safe from invaders, but you're also locked out of the cooperative side of multiplayer and so will need to do bosses alone. Which, without wanting to sound snobbish, is something you should really do the first few times anyway – learning attack patterns is a key part of the game and you'll miss out on all of that if you have a summoned ally holding aggro while you just safely wail away on a creature from behind.

Before you've had a chance to really invest in upping your HP, this safety net is invaluable and losing an Ember by tumbling off a cliff or getting greedy with regular enemies is enormously frustrating, but it at least gives you another reason not to screw up. Getting through a tricky boss battle also adds another layer of air-punching satisfaction to overcoming the encounter, since you get a freebie if you can get through the fight without that extra padding. Said bosses are the

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

LACK OF MEMORY: *DSII*'s infuriating Soul Memory stat is gone, so matchmaking is once again based purely on level.
BOSS RUSH: Tired of circle-strafing around big dude? You're in luck – *DSIII* has the most varied and interesting showdowns in the whole series.

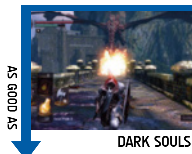


DETAILS
- **FORMAT:** PS4
- **OTHER FORMATS:** Xbox One, PC
- **ORIGIN:** Japan
- **PUBLISHER:** Bandai Namco
- **DEVELOPER:** FromSoftware
- **PRICE:** £49.99
- **RELEASE:** Out now
- **PLAYERS:** 1 (2-6 online)
- **ONLINE REVIEWED:** Yes

Above: Below 70 per cent equip load, there are no agility caps. Instead, reducing load beyond this point incrementally improves the speed, distance and invulnerability of your dodge roll.

BETTER THAN
LORDS OF THE FALLEN





AS GOOD AS
DARK SOULS



Right: Boss themes are absolutely incredible, transformations and phase shifts sending the powerful orchestral pieces soaring onto new planes that really emphasise the intensity of each battle.

FROM SOFTWARE HAS MANAGED TO DELIVER BOTH A STANDALONE GAME AND ONE THAT CAN GIVE RETURNING FANS EVEN MORE OF A SENSE OF PURPOSE



U MAD, BRO?

Although the pedestrian nature of most of the Covenants is a little disappointing, there's one in particular that feels like it could have been so much better. Join the Mound-Makers and you have two different options for invasion – the traditional method using Red Eye Orbs or, more interestingly, via summon signs placed by would-be cooperators. In either case, you become a purple Mad Phantom, able to take down either any co-op buddies or additional invaders you find for fun and profit. Three-way battles are cool in theory but not all that common in our experience – it'd be more interesting to have these Mad Phantoms act like *The Division*'s Dark Zone rogues, unreliable allies that might turn on the host if the reward on their head looks more appealing than what they could gain from actually helping.

TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

10 MINS

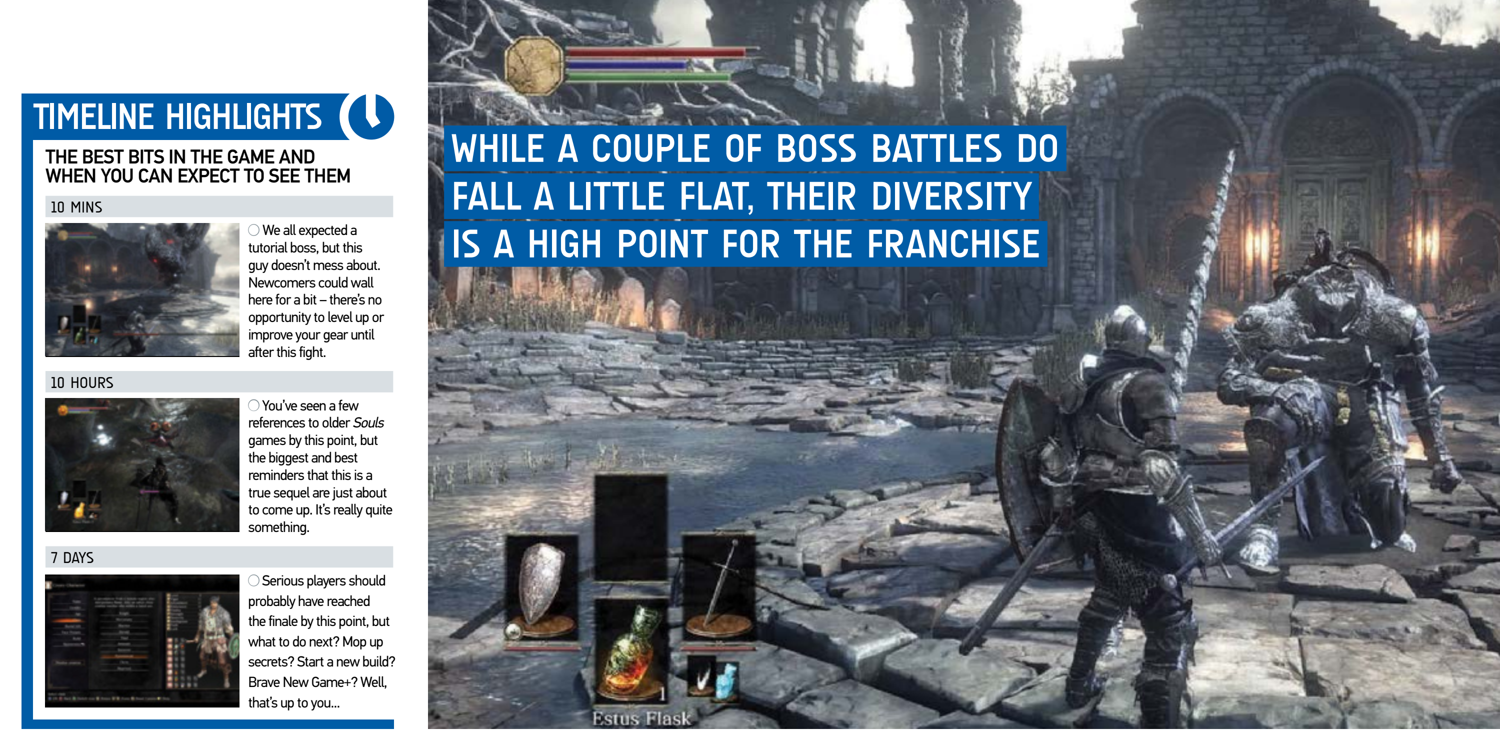
We all expected a tutorial boss, but this guy doesn't mess about. Newcomers could wall here for a bit – there's no opportunity to level up or improve your gear until after this fight.

10 HOURS

You've seen a few references to older *Souls* games by this point, but the biggest and best reminders that this is a true sequel are just about to come up. It's really quite something.

7 DAYS

Serious players should probably have reached the finale by this point, but what to do next? Mop up secrets? Start a new build? Brave New Game+? Well, that's up to you...



WHILE A COUPLE OF BOSS BATTLES DO FALL A LITTLE FLAT, THEIR DIVERSITY IS A HIGH POINT FOR THE FRANCHISE

Below: A lot of the more popular gear from previous games returns so if you've got a favourite weapon or armour set, it's safe to assume that either the real deal or a very close approximation will be available.

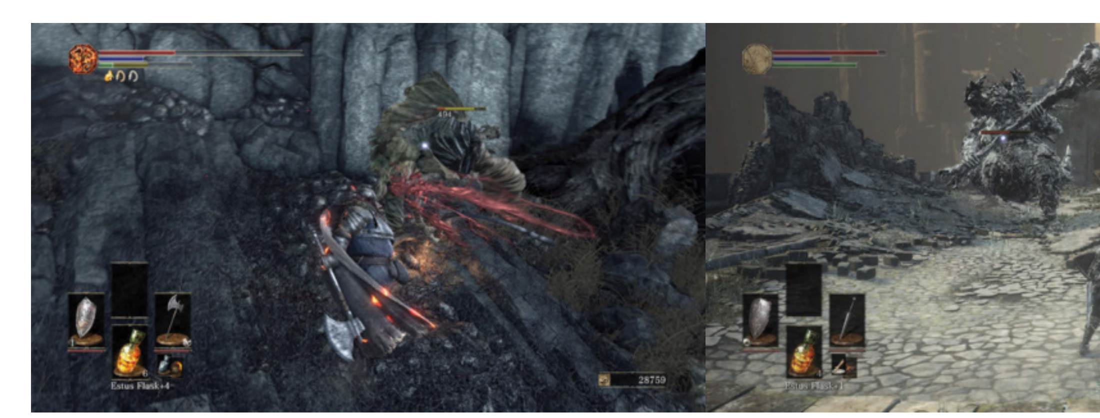




Above: The selection of Burial Gifts upon character creation is much more straightforward than in previous games – there's no mystery object that may or may not do something at some point; it's pretty much all useful.

Going In Blind

While we'll always champion the notion that *Souls* games are best enjoyed without any outside help on the first run or two, it's important to note that *DSIII* has quite a few side-quests, areas and items that you're almost certain to miss without a degree of guidance. Depending on how and when you progress through story events and other distractions, certain extras might end up locked off for an entire playthrough – especially frustrating on a second run when you don't know the exact criteria for unlocking something you were relying on having access to. There's the odd hinted warning in the case of some of the more major missables but even so, you're going to need to hit up a guide at some point if you have your eye on that shiny Platinum Trophy.







FAQs

Q. HOW LONG IS IT?
Expect a first blind run of the game to come in somewhere around the 40-hour mark. Speed-runners have already gone sub-two, though.

Q. IS MAGIC STILL OP?
No, actually – From has nerfed it into the ground. Pyromancy still seems viable but Sorceries and Miracles are underwhelming.

Q. WHAT'S THE BEST ARMOUR?
Probably the [spoiler] set you find in [redacted]. Seriously, though, there are enough cool original and returning sets that you'll easily find one to love based on your play style.





A highlight of the game and while a couple of battles do fall a little flat, their diversity is a high point for the franchise. It was clear from all the pre-launch chatter that having bosses and even regular enemies undergo transformations midway through battles would be key to this game but that's not really anything new – Father Gascoigne had an extremely clear shift mid-fight, and series benchmark Ornstein and Smough did something similar.

From continues to find new ways to push this mechanic over the course of the game, but that's not even the best part. No, it's nice to see encounters that challenge players in different ways, especially after *DSII*'s big bads were typically just large dudes to circle around until an opening presented itself. Some have specific gimmicks, others introduce multiple enemies (without ever stumbling into the Gank Squad territory that *DSII*'s DLC did) while others try out entirely new concepts for how a *Souls* boss battle could play out and the game is all the more interesting for it. Some become less replayable when it comes to jolly cooperation as a result, but that's always been the case for various other reasons anyway – we've seen more summon signs outside and around the Smelter Demon boss room than we have in the rest of the series combined, so it's not like having 'novelty' bosses is going to hurt Sunbros, especially when there are plenty of genuinely challenging bosses that they can go help out with instead.

Mechanically, a bunch of smaller changes help with freedom of experimentation with various builds and options. Doing away with armour upgrades works twofold in this regard, freeing up resources to be used on weapons and preventing you from falling into the trap of getting too attached to the gear you already upgraded to try something new. The weapon infusion system is a clear callback to the more complex upgrade paths of *Demon's Souls*, though it has been simplified here to allow scaling modifications that suit more or less any build.

With the right gems (most of which can be farmed) and coals, you can warp standard weapons to scale with pretty much any of your preferred primary stats – great for casters who want a solid melee backup option, STR or DEX builds looking for laser-focused stat scaling to maximise damage or even just those looking to mess with people's heads in PvP. It certainly adds more options and makes more tools viable for each type of character, even if it doesn't apply to special weapons. Not like that even matters; the starting Battle Axe from the Warrior archetype carried us through our entire first run of the game after a little modification.

Weapon Arts are another new feature designed to promote experimentation, and they fulfil this task reasonably well. Many of the more common ones are situational at best (Quickstep, found on many smaller weapons, only really seems useful on slower enemies and those that use mostly linear attacks, for instance) and the FP is often better used on backup heals between Estus uses, but unique weapons are where this system really becomes interesting. By letting you use bosses' signature attacks, you can always have an ace up your sleeve… well, until invaders learn to recognise special weapons and their traits from sight, at least.

The shift away from limited spell uses actually hurts casters (as too do slower cast times in a quicker game) who must sacrifice regular Estus Flasks for Ash ones in order to keep FP topped up. While we've been wrecked by enough magic-based opponents that we almost see this as a positive, it does sort of fly in the face of all the other changes that promote variety among builds, relegating magic to a secondary option rather than something that you can build a character around. We're sure the first round of patches will do something to smooth this out but for the time being, it sure feels like casters are treated like the second-class citizens of this horrible world.

Those hoping that leaving behind last-gen systems might allow From to deliver something technically impressive might find themselves as crestfallen as former casters. Artistically, the game looks amazing but frequent frame drops, instances of slowdown and texture pop-in all rear their ugly heads all too often. It's not as though this is a studio known for its technical prowess (looking at a screenshot of Blighttown is a fairly accurate representation of its original frame-rate) but it's still a bit disappointing when the core mechanics are so incredibly strong. Again, patches will likely address this to a degree and it's much more noticeable in some areas and situations than others – it's just a shame that once again, performance can't keep up with the quality on display in almost every other aspect of the game.

But when you finally overcome a particularly troublesome boss after what feels like a lifetime of trying, you're not going to care about that spot of jittering a few hours prior. You're not going to care that the reworked weapon system has forced you to play in a different way to what you might be used to. And you're certainly not going to care that winning now might mean you miss out on seeing something on this run, because there will be more. Many more.

WORLDWIDE

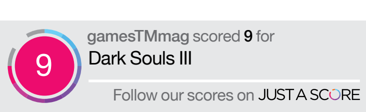
TAKING GAMING ONLINE

COVENANT CRISIS: While the Covenant system has been reworked to allow for experimentation without punishment, the selection of groups you can join is fairly uninteresting for the most part. Old favourites return, but the new ones pale next to, say, Gravelord or Rat King factions.

The primary allure of the *Souls* games is the replayability they offer, whether that comes in the form of repeatedly upping the difficulty with the various stages of New Game+ or starting anew with some kind of personally-imposed stipulation (SL1 runners are already making outstanding progress). Despite how horrible it all is, how there are entire areas you'd gladly never see again, you'll still gladly begin the ordeal anew time and again. Such is the fate of the Unkindled, just as it was the chosen undead before them and it's no less demanding or satisfying than it was the first time. Refined combat, excellent creature and world design and frequent shout-outs to series highlights make this, in many ways, the best of the lot. If this is indeed how *Dark Souls* dies, at least we can take solace in the fact that From had the foresight to spend all its hard-earned souls on upgrades before the series bit the dust.

VERDICT

FROMSOFTWARE (P)RAISES THE BAR ONCE AGAIN





TIME IS THE NUMBER ONE KILLER

Quantum Break

This is largely dependent on which side of the console war you fall on, but the Xbox One was either dead on arrival or in need of a true killer IP to sell itself to the masses. While *Quantum Break* isn't likely to have the same sales impact as an *Uncharted* or a *Halo*, it does feel like the game this generation needs: inherently ambitious in its design, creative with its execution, and stylish as all hell. But then again, we've come to expect nothing less from Remedy Entertainment.

This is, after all, a studio that has built itself quite the reputation through 20 years of developing linear, cinematic shooters in the likes of *Max Payne* and *Alan Wake*. It's that pedigree that makes *Quantum Break* such a 'must-play experience' – or should we say 'must-experience experience'? Because while there's a sublime campaign to be enjoyed, it's also paired with an intertwined live-action series, and the resulting product is more successful than you probably imagined it ever could be.

At the heart of it all, *Quantum Break* is a confident and driven action-adventure game that rewards those that are willing to pace themselves and take the time to investigate every oddity, every corner of the world and (perhaps most importantly) question everything placed in front of them. That was, admittedly, a gamble on Remedy's part; most modern media that dares to tackle the realities of time travel often finds its plot riddled with loose threads that unravel the story's logic at the slightest tug, though *Quantum Break* persists with some presence. If you're willing to put in the time, you'll have no trouble getting your head wrapped around the time warping realities of a failed experiment at Riverport University and the impact it has had on *Quantum Break*'s two lead characters, Jack Joyce and Paul Serene.

Quantum Break largely borrows its structure from *Alan Wake*; moments of intense cinematic action broken apart by lengthy opportunities to digest the plot points and soak in the atmosphere of the world. And you'll want to, not only to fully understand the intricacies to the time travel narrative and the various shifting alliances between characters, but to appreciate the creation itself.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: Finland
PUBLISHER: Microsoft Game Studios
DEVELOPER: Remedy Entertainment
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER



AS GOOD AS



ALAN WAKE



Above: The coolest moments of *Quantum Break* arrive in the time stutters, which give you a chance to catch your breath and gaze at the wonder of chaos frozen.

Below: Remedy is no stranger to fan service and eagle-eyed viewers will see a handful of links between *Max Payne*, *Alan Wake* and *Quantum Break*.



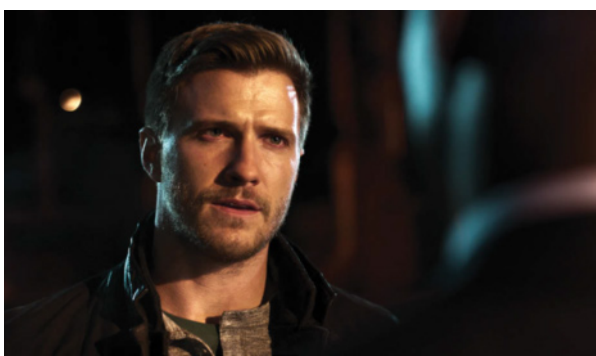
FAQs

Q. DO I HAVE TO WATCH THE SHOW?
You don't have to and could skip without any major hassle, but it does help to build tension and a better idea of the big picture.

Q. IS IT REPLAYABLE?
It's easy enough to do a 100% run through on the first try, which is highly recommended, with the reason to return being to see alternative choices play out.

Q. HOW LONG IS THE GAME?
The game is about eight hours long, depending on how long you take to search out the hidden narrative extras, with about two hours of show to watch on top.

Below: This came as a great surprise to us, but by the time the game reached its conclusion we actually found ourselves wishing there were more episodes of the show to watch. Thankfully, with so many branching paths, there are at least alternate episodes to find and view.



THE HANGING THREADS AND A SPOILER WARNING

It's clear that the six-year development of *Quantum Break* – which necessitated re-casting lead characters, excising playable characters and script overhauls – has been arduous for Remedy, and that means that a fair few plot points are left dangling by the game's conclusion. The once playable Beth Wilder feels a little short-changed by the narrative, for example, and the threat of a new foe never quite delivers. That said, *Quantum Break* manages to keep it together in its closing act much better than *Alan Wake* was able to, it's just left us awaiting a sequel and more of the show, which may never happen – at least not any time soon.

QUANTUM BREAK IS A CONFIDENT AND DRIVEN ACTION-ADVENTURE GAME THAT REWARDS THOSE THAT ARE WILLING TO PACE THEMSELVES

As time itself begins to break down, as stutters in reality cause moments to freeze and unravel around you, you're left to marvel at one of the most beautiful and visually evocative games of the generation. Were you concerned by *Quantum Break*'s limiting 720p resolution? Don't be; the studio's new proprietary Northlight Engine has allowed the artists and animators at Remedy to craft some truly breathtaking scenarios.

While *Alan Wake* was more than content in ending its chapters with title credits and a tease of what's to come – giving it the illusion of TV sensibilities – *Quantum Break* goes one step further by introducing full-length, 20-minute episodes of live action to watch. After running, gunning and time-shifting your way through a segment of gameplay as Jack Joyce, you'll have the opportunity to play as villain Paul Serene and use his control over reality to dictate the direction of the story – that's where the episodes come into play.

FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

LIVE ACTION: The integration with a live action show helps to bring a big dose of personality and immersion to the overall experience

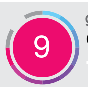
It's a little strange and disorientating at first; actively being asked to put your controller down and to passively experience the game for a length of time but, honestly, it works. The quality of the show is fantastic, often feeling on par with the best moments of Marvel's *Agents Of S.H.I.E.L.D* in terms of budget and production value. While the pacing of episodes has a tendency to stumble, it's made up for massively with strong performances from the cast (who have given their likenesses and voices to characters in both game and show) and strong scenes of action that really raises the stakes for all involved. We can't see this setup working for every game, nor would we want it to, but it's an interesting experiment that makes *Quantum Break* feel truly unique; it's the realisation of Microsoft's original 'All-In-One Entertainment System' dream come to life, albeit three years too late and long after Microsoft has largely moved away from that concept.

While the live-action integration will likely be the talking point for some time with *Quantum Break*, as will the standout performance from Patrick Heusinger, who plays Monarch bodyguard Liam Burke, it's the combat that truly sells the game and its concept of time-warping action and adventure. If you've ever wondered whether Remedy misses making *Max Payne* games, this should effortlessly answer the question for you – gun fights are cinematic and explosive, forcing you to utilise an array of time-shifting powers to get the better of your enemies.

Be it darting between cover in the blink of an eye, tearing apart the fabric of reality to rush opponents, or freezing specific bubbles of time to enhance your damage capabilities, it has a way of making you feel powerful and dangerous. That does have quite the effect on the difficulty curve, mind; even on the hardest difficulty setting we rarely struggled – in fact, any deaths we encountered were largely down to mistiming some of the more intensive platforming puzzles.

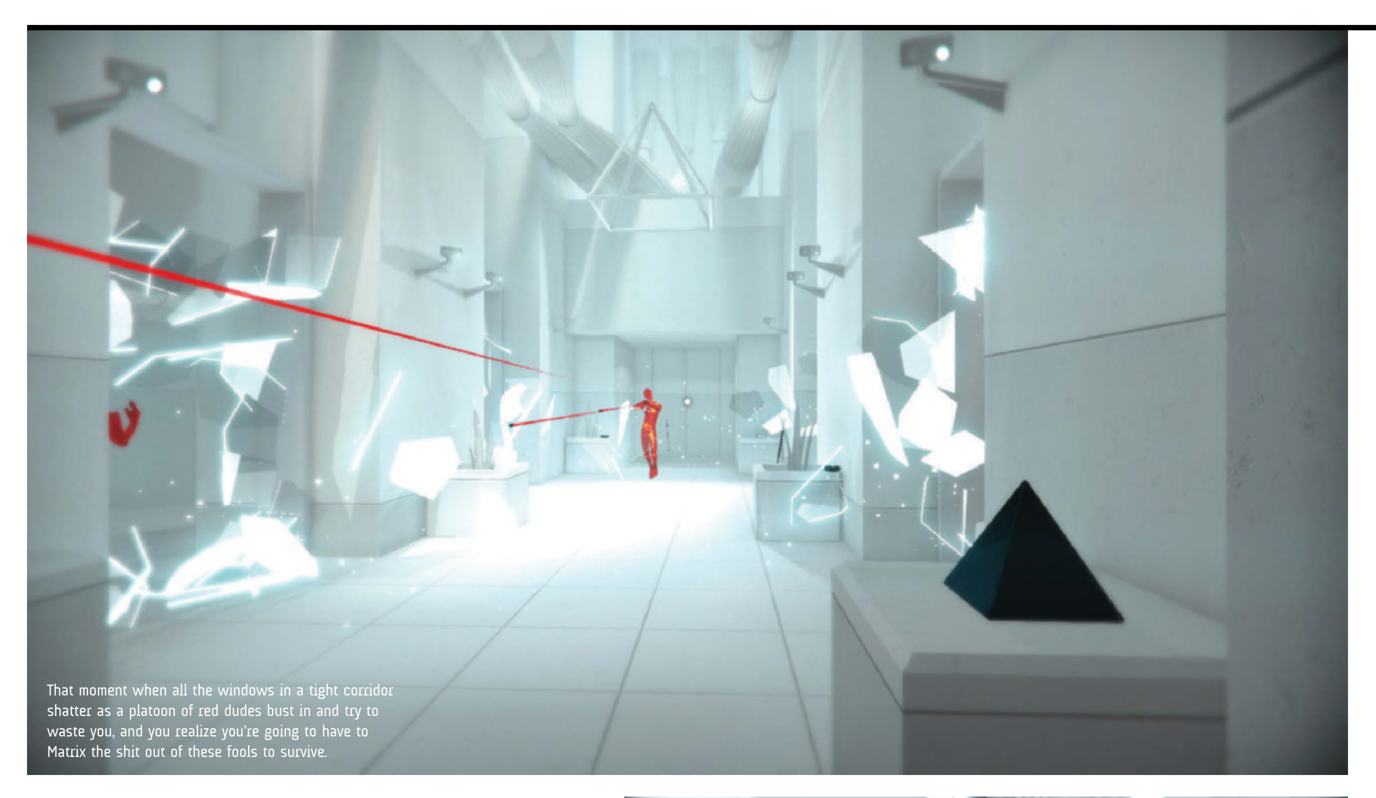
Quantum Break isn't for everybody and that's okay. It doesn't move at the breakneck pace of most games nowadays, nor does it ever seem particularly concerned to address some of the plot points or character gaps it leaves dangling, but those that take the chance on the full *Quantum Break* experience (episodes and all) will find a quirky and unique experience waiting that you just won't see replicated anywhere else. *Quantum Break* might just be Remedy's finest game to date.

VERDICT
A CONFIDENT, BOLD AND THRILLING ACTION-ADVENTURE



gamesTMmag scored **9** for
Quantum Break
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE




That moment when all the windows in a tight corridor shatter as a platoon of red dudes bust in and try to waste you, and you realize you're going to have to Matrix the shit out of these fools to survive.

A FROZEN MOMENT OF SHEER BRILLIANCE

Superhot

Superhot **is a spectacular example of the current indie development scene's bold innovation, and yet it feels like a game that – in it's current form at least – doesn't quite live up to its full potential.**

Superhot is a first-person shooter in which you use pistols, shotguns, assault rifles and various thrown objects to kill a bunch of red guys in a series of short, snappy set pieces. But there's one significant twist; when you're stood still, time itself is paused. When you move, time flows. And this simple mechanic makes for one of the most interesting puzzle games of recent times.

You're always vastly outnumbered and outgunned, and a single hit means death. This forces you to play slowly and thoughtfully. If you try to sprint through in 'real time' you'll be shot and killed for certain. But if you stop and take a moment to look around, you'll see bullets in mid-flight and enemies almost frozen where they stand. This lets you literally dodge incoming fire as though you were Neo from *The Matrix*, and return shots of your own with pinpoint accuracy.

The challenge lies in your decision making. You see a man with a pistol, you dodge his first shot and punch him in the face. He drops his gun and you catch it in mid-air. Do you shoot him first or the guy behind you who's about to unload a shotgun blast in your direction? Should you jump behind the bar, take cover behind a nearby wall or run towards your assailant trusting that you won't be ambushed by someone else? Whatever you choose to do, it'll feel great and look spectacular in the game's unique red and white art style.

The campaign is startlingly short – two hours is all it took us to shoot through its intriguing and mysterious story about you, the player, partaking in some sort of sinister sub-plot. But the package is bolstered with longer-lasting Endless and Challenge modes that set unique and fun scenarios, such as forcing you to play missions using only a katana sword or complete stages within set time limits, with more promised in future updates.

Yet, despite the entertaining end-game unlocks, the game fails to expand on its time-manipulation mechanic beyond its initial bullet-dodging pitch. It feels like a foundation for what could have been a much bigger, far more expansive and more creative game. But instead, the game's appeal hinges solely on the visceral satisfaction of dodging and shooting slow-motion bullets.

Luckily, the core concept coupled with that gorgeous and impactful art style is enough to warrant our recommendation. Your time with *Superhot* may be fleeting, but you'll find every second exhilarating.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Mac, Xbox One
ORIGIN: Poland
PUBLISHER: Superhot Team
DEVELOPER: In-House
PRICE: £17.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows 7, Intel Core2Quad Q6600 2.4GHz CPU, 4GB RAM, GeForce GTX 650 1GB GPU, 4GB HDD space.
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN
ENTER THE MATRIX



WORSE THAN
PORTAL

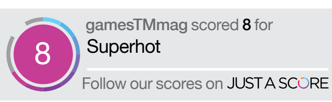
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

SPEAKING IN COLOUR: There's ingenious design behind *Superhot*'s slick art style. Anything black can be used as a weapon, whereas everything red is to be avoided. Significant objects are easily identifiable.

VERDICT

A SHORT BUT UNIQUELY BRILLIANT STRATEGY SHOOTER



PUTS ITS MONEY WHERE ITS MEOWTH IS

Pokkén Tournament

DETAILS

FORMAT: Wii U
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Bandai Namco
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

***Pokkén Tournament* is a surprising game.** It's surprising in a number of ways, not least because it even exists in the first place. For The Pokémon Company – usually notoriously protective over its IP – to give its blessing to a game in which Pokémon kick seven shades of Scizor out of each other is something few could have expected. Perhaps even more remarkable, however, is that *Pokkén Tournament* bucks the trend set by most *Pokémon* spin-offs by actually being an accomplished, entertaining game.

Although at first glance – given its name and the fact it's produced by Katsuhiro Harada – it may appear that *Pokkén Tournament* is essentially a crossover between *Pokémon* and Harada's *Tekken* series. In practice it's actually a very different beast, one with a faster-paced fighting style that feels more like Bandai Namco's *Dragon Ball* games.

Battles take place in large arenas and consist of two different 'phases'. Players always start off in 'Field Phase', with both Pokémon freely running around, firing projectiles at each other and trying to find an opening to attack. Certain moves then trigger 'Dual Phase', where the action switches to a more conventional 2D viewpoint and movement is locked onto one plane. Fights frequently switch between phases, resulting in exciting battles that continually mix things up to keep them interesting.

This goes some way in making up for each fighter's fairly limited moveset. There are only three buttons used for combat and the fighters have nowhere near the same range of moves as you'll see in the *Tekken* games. The game tries to make things tactical by introducing a rock-paper-scissors style attack system in which grabs beat counters, counters beat attacks and attacks beat grabs, but ultimately this becomes such a guessing game that it's impossible to build a strategy around it. As a result, this concept is quickly abandoned in favour of just getting stuck in, which may not be refined but it's certainly bloody good fun.

At least, it is for a while. Because of the limited movesets, fights can start to feel very repetitive if you play for long periods of time with the same character. Thankfully, each of the 16 playable Pokémon has a distinctly

Right: Landing attacks builds your Synergy Gauge. When it maxes out you can activate a power boost for a limited time as well as a special attack that, if it connects, triggers an elaborate attack cutscene that ends with massive damage.

Below: Each Pokémon is presented to scale, making for some of the biggest height differences you'll see in a fighting game.



Below: Nia is a battle trainer who regularly gives you advice mid-fight. She gets a tad repetitive but you can turn her off.



EXPECT A LOT OF GRINDING TO LEVEL UP JUST ONE POKÉMON TO THE MAX LEVEL OF 100, LET ALONE ALL OF THEM



DRESS TO IMPRESS

One of the most in-depth elements of the game is actually dressing your avatar. When you start the game you have a fairly generic looking Pokémon trainer but as you progress in the game you'll unlock a wealth of new outfits, from hats and scarves to moles and full school uniforms, which can be bought using in-game currency earned through battles (no microtransactions here). If you fancy getting a bit of a head-start on this you can do so with amiibo figures, as every day you can scan up to five different amiibo to unlock five random items of clothing for your avatar, saving you some virtual cash and bringing you closer to your ultimate goal of owning the entire collection.

different feel, partly due to their appearances, which are more weird and wonderful than you'd normally expect in a fighting game.

Pikachu (and his luchador counterpart) is a nippy little ankle-biter, quickly darting around the stage and annoying his opponents, while the wolf-like Suicune (who naturally runs around on four legs) has a completely different style focused on kicks and ice blasts. Mastering every character is an enjoyable pursuit and juggling between them keeps things feeling fresh.

This is particularly welcome when taking on the single-player Ferrum League. This is the main solo mode and sees you fighting through numerous leagues of fighters. In each league you have to work your way up the rankings until you're in the top eight, before entering a seeded tournament and, after winning that, facing a final opponent to gain promotion to the next league. With each league both the difficulty and the number of opponents you have to face increases, and by the time you get to the end of this mode you'd be forgiven for being thoroughly sick of the whole process.

In its defence, it's rare that a fighting game has a solid, in-depth single-player offering because the genre thrives on multiplayer, and *Pokkén Tournament* does try its best to keep the solo player interested in a number of ways. The Ferrum League mode does have a basic story running through it, in which occasional cutscenes appear between battles and you learn more about a mysterious dark Mewtwo that has been frequently turning up and looking ominous. This does at least keep you going, if only to see how the story concludes and so you can get the inevitable reward that you'd expect when it does.

It also features a levelling-up system: each Pokémon can level up to 100, achieving a new ability point that can be assigned to a stat of your choosing each time they level up. Expect a lot of grinding (as is the *Pokémon* way, after all) to fully max out one character though, let alone all of them: after 50 battles with our Pikachu Libre we were still only at level 25 and progress was slowing.

Ultimately though, multiplayer is really where *Pokkén Tournament* shines. While playing the CPU eventually becomes an exercise in patience over long periods – especially because even on harder difficulties it willingly takes a lot of silly blows – when you're up against a human opponent and you're each sizing each other up you can have some brilliant tide-turning matches.

Local multiplayer is also where *Pokkén Tournament* makes surprisingly good use of the Wii U GamePad. Since the 'Field Phase' sections are played with an over-the-shoulder view, one player – the one at the back of the screen – would usually be at a disadvantage. Instead, the GamePad acts as a second screen, turning the camera round and giving each player the same third-person view. It's a feeling not unlike having two arcade machines linked together; a rare use of the hardware in a way that can't be replicated on other systems, something the Wii U could do more of.

Much like the recently released *Street Fighter V*, *Pokkén Tournament* is a fighting game that only really comes into its own if you plan on playing it in local or online multiplayer. Solo gameplay is fun in short bursts, but to get the most out of this one you're going to need a partner to duke it out with.

FAQs

Q. ANY HIDDEN CHARACTERS?
Shadow Mewtwo can be unlocked through gameplay, though boxed versions come with an amiibo card that unlocks him instantly.

Q. HOW'RE THE VOICEOVERS?
As is often the case, only Pikachu has his voice as heard in the animated series. Others just grunt a bit.

Q. IT LOOKS EASY...
It is, really, since it's obviously aimed at younger players too. This is another reason why playing against humans is recommended.

BETTER THAN
POKEPARK 2: WONDERS BEYOND

WORSE THAN
TEKKEN TAG TOURNAMENT 2

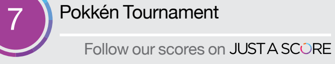
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

WRESTLING PIKACHU: For some reason, you can play as a luchador version of Pikachu who can pull off a Stone Cold Stunner move, WWE-style. Points for originality, at least.

VERDICT

EXCITING MULTIPLAYER MAKES UP FOR SOLO MODE



A WIN ON POINTS

EA Sports UFC 2

The feeling we get as we enter the third round of a bout in *EA Sports UFC 2* is not entirely unlike how we feel in a *Dark Souls* boss battle. Our shoulders are hunched and tense. There's a sense of fear, foreboding and determination looming and a furrow in our brow. Every move we make, every gesture towards attack or defence could be our last, or it could win us everything. In this respect *UFC 2* does a great job of embodying the inherent threat and chaos of mixed martial arts, but it's still not gotten the mechanics to a place where that can be universally appreciated.

The brutality is certainly there, though, and that's probably where a lot of this tension begins to build up. The animations, skin effects and physics of *UFC 2* all combine together in some pretty horrific ways, thankfully all intentional on the part of the developer. We experienced very few of the glitches and hilarious bodily malfunctions that made EA Sports' previous effort such a hit with YouTubers and gif makers, but there was still some of that going on. For the most part though the illusion is unbroken, keeping you in touch with the action, locked inside the octagon.

What might draw you out is the mechanics of the game, still dulling some of the fluidity and accessibility that might otherwise make *EA Sports UFC 2* an essential couch multiplayer experience.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: EA
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £44.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



Things have been improved, not least with clinch and ground movements now being given clear contextual titles so you know exactly how to get from half guard to side control, or when you're in a position to lock in a kimura. Likewise in submissions the tactical battle can be fierce as attacker and defender vie for control in an octagonal representation of the left and right analogue sticks. It puts an emphasis on speedy reactions and smart play for both parties.

Still, it's the stand-up fisticuffs that remain the strongest element of the game, drawing on the core mechanics of EA's classic *Fight Night* series, but with the welcome emphasis on face buttons. Moving to the sticks for clinches and ground attacks does feel like a disconnect, although we could see an argument being made that these more specialised elements of MMA are being reflected by demanding a different approach from players. We're not sure that argument holds up for long, but it's a nice thought.

This year's *UFC* feels like it improves in some key areas – overall quality, game modes and such – but not enough to really feel a great leap from the past. There's also a general lack of fluidity that can make the whole game feel a little sluggish. Stamina drainage could maybe do with a little more leeway. And working out who has control of the ground game at times is still a challenge. It may err on the side of realism in this respect, but some concessions to accessibility wouldn't have gone amiss.

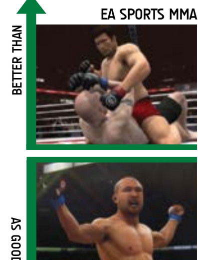
MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

UP AND COMER: EA has done a fine job in expanding different gameplay options and opening up the women's division for created characters, but low-ability fighters can be a chore to use in career and Ultimate Team modes.

BETTER THAN

EA SPORTS MMA



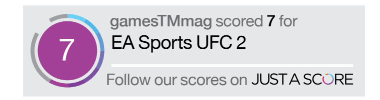


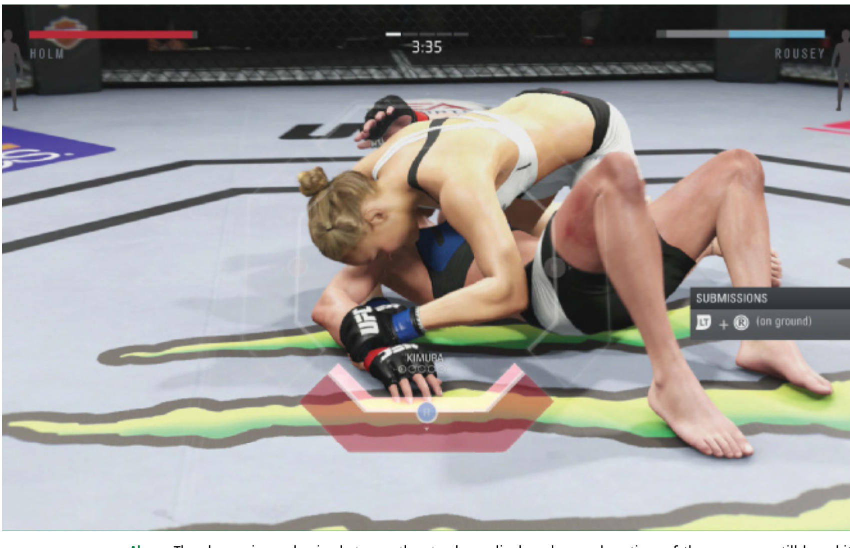
EA SPORTS UFC

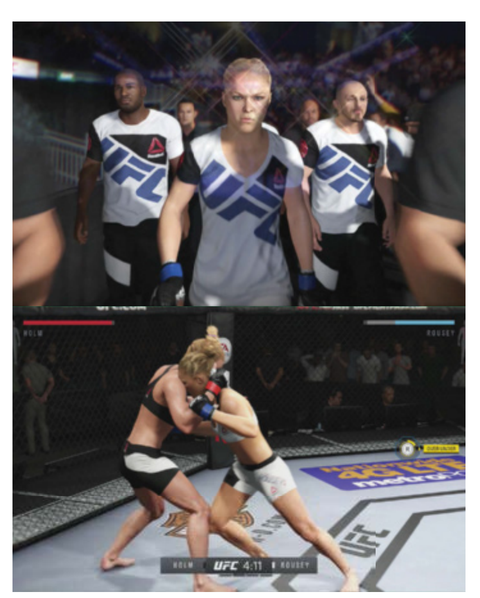
AS GOOD AS



IT'S BEEN WORKING OUT, BUT NEEDS MORE GYM TIME







Above: The change in mechanics between the stand-up, clinch and ground portions of the game can still be a bit jarring, but it does mean that different players may well find they excel in one over others, not unlike the sport itself.

THE END IS DARK, BUT SO ENGROSSING

Sheltered

***Sheltered*'s title not only refers to the impossibly grim situation facing its protagonists, but also the complacent minds of the people destined to play it.** Never before has a game set in the aftermath of a nuclear apocalypse pulled fewer punches: it offers a malleable narrative that literally never ends happily, and the more attached you become to the characters that you have a confined hand in creating, the more gruelling the whole enterprise becomes. Children will be inexplicably murdered above ground when you have no option but to send them off scavenging for you. If you never found the right resources to build a freezer for stashing corpses in, family members will very quickly start losing their marbles. And when things really start going to pot, that roaming drifter who you generously took under your wing will stand around and watch you all starve, berate you for not feeding your dog and then rob you. The word 'bleak' doesn't do it justice, but *Sheltered* is a shrewd, bracing mystery as well as a crisis management sim.



DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Xbox One
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Team17
DEVELOPER: Unicube
PRICE: £9.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

STATE OF DECAY





FALLOUT 3

WORSE THAN

Below: Each and every run-through begins with choosing the five members of your family, pet included. In addition to selecting one beneficial trait per character (heavy sleeper, small eater and so on) race and gender are also down to you.



Explanations are scarce. The game's tutorial is swift and pitiless, and doing something as simple as feeding the family pet involves investigation, which is hardly ideal when your oxygen filter needs fixing and water's running low. And yet somehow, playing through *Sheltered* is a totally energising experience, which is incredible when you consider that it's fixated on stressing you out. Someone is always suffering and you're always on the brink of some kind of crisis, but every small victory – be it the salvation of a random rainstorm or the discovery of an abandoned church filled with essential components – brings both joy and genuine comfort. Until fresh disasters start looming mere seconds later.

Small text windows occasionally pop up to let you know what members of your clan are saying or thinking. They feel like potential clues at first, but it's a con: there's no reprieve from the brutal randomness of everything, and the fact that so much is down to chance might be a serious barrier for some. You can improvise yourself out of most situations if you've been paying strict attention, but the second you turn your back on something, it sucker punches you. If you manage your trips to the surface carelessly, then you'll be forced to watch everyone around you slowly perish because you never found a hinge for that freezer or because it just won't bloody rain.

If you enjoyed last year's iOS/Android sleeper *Fallout Shelter*, but wanted more complexity, less predictable combat and a greater sense of achievement even in abject failure, look no further. Who said that certain death had to be depressing?

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

NO ASSISTS: Games like this almost always over-explain everything. The fact that *Sheltered* doesn't explain much is galling at first, but it makes every triumph so much more gratifying.

VERDICT

BLEAK, BRUTAL AND EXHILARATING

9

gamesTMmag scored **9** for Sheltered

Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE



Above: Whenever you send one or two group members out on an excursion, always make sure that you keep an eye on the signals coming from the radio. Encounters and useful locations that they come across will be bypassed without your advice.



DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, PC
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Maximum Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

MINDJACK





WORSE THAN

HITMAN: BLOOD MONEY

MISSMAN

Alekhine's Gun

With IO relaunching the *Hitman* series this month to great success, Maximum could not have picked a worse time to release *Alekhine's Gun.* A third-person stealth game where you don disguises, infiltrate enemy compounds and perform assassinations – if it didn't already beg comparison to IO's flagship series, its proximity to the new *Hitman* places the two in direct competition and *Alekhine's Gun*, bluntly, doesn't stand a shred of a chance. Set during the Cold War, across various countries and decades, *Alekhine's Gun* ought to be filled with visual flair. But from a Nazi stronghold to an American bar, all of the locations are lifeless and monotone. On the surface, mechanically, it's an almost carbon copy of *Hitman*: enter an area, find a disguise, slip past the guards, whack your target. But *Alekhine's Gun* is devoid of refinement. All of the details and idiosyncrasies that make each level of *Hitman* a puzzle – almost a full game – unto itself are missing from this disappointing offering.

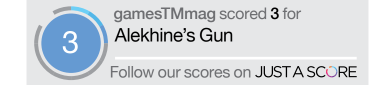
You never mix up the formula. You never really have to think. Stab a guard, take his clothes and you're more or less set for the rest of the level. The game's title is a (pretentious) reference to a chess formation, but the game itself is simple and mentally unchallenging – it's more like Kerplunk.

And that's when it's working. Walk into a room full of guards, massacre them all with a machine-gun then put your weapon away and wait. When someone comes to inspect the noise, as long as your gun is holstered they'll just turn and walk away. This is a poor *Hitman* imitation, bereft of any sort of sophisticated design or writing. And it couldn't have come at a worse time.



VERDICT

A POOR MAN'S – NO, A TOTALLY BROKE MAN'S – HITMAN





Below: Levels are spread across different locations and time periods, but all feel largely the same.

"THAT WAS LIQUID FOOTBALL!"

Top Eleven 2016

DETAILS

FORMAT: Android
OTHER FORMATS: iOS
ORIGIN: Ireland
PUBLISHER: Nordeus
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: Free-to-play
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1 (2 online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

LINE FOOTBALL LEAGUE MANAGER



WORSE THAN

FOOTBALL MANAGER HANDHELD



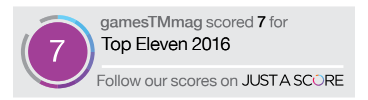
What a joy it is to win a match in *Top Eleven.* You can play friendlies with AI teams, but the crux of the game is scheduling matches with other players – you pick an opponent, then come kick-off you receive a notification telling you it's time to watch. And after so much trawling through menus (*Top Eleven* has A LOT of menus) it's a thrill, and a relief, when your squad walks off the pitch victorious. It's almost primordial. When you've spent hours scouting for new players, signing sponsorship deals and arranging your training drills you can't help but want to message your defeated opponent saying "Ha! I beat you. I BEAT YOU." More than any kill streak in *Call of Duty*, winning in *Top Eleven* feels good.

But it does take a lot of micro-management. There's a funny push and pull here aesthetically. On the one side, *Top Eleven* is a deeply involved management sim, demanding lots of patience and attention to detail, the kind of thing only true football enthusiasts will have love for. On the other side, it's all fiction – you make your own team and team name, sign made up players a la the early *Pro Evolution* games, and play against other fantasy squads. *Top Eleven* is deep but it doesn't have that final polish to make it a truly realistic management game.

And it can be a little fiddly. Selecting players, dragging them into formation and opening and closing menus takes a pretty steady finger. The always online, massively-multiplayer aspect pretty much demands mobile, but controls wise, something like *Top Eleven* would be better suited to a mouse and keyboard. Nevertheless, it's surprisingly meaty. If you want an in-depth football manager game, coupled with the territorial joy of completely beating down an opponent, this is one for you.

VERDICT

INSANE MENUS BUT ENTHUSIASTS WILL ENJOY





> "I just thought the spectacle and the ambition of that game was amazing"
>
> **PATRICK O'LUANAIGH, CEO, NDREAMS**



WHY I ❤...

MIDWINTER

PATRICK O'LUANAIGH, CEO, NDREAMS

"I'm going to have to go old school to find a game that I love. There's a game called Midwinter, an old Atari ST game that I just always loved. It was kind of an open world game and you could explore all over the place… look if I try to explain the features of it now it's going to sound limited. But you have to understand: it had ice and mountains, shooting and vehicles, you could talk to people and it had stats for your character… it was just really cool and it opened my imagination. If you look at it now it has dated quite a bit. But oh my god! It was the start of where games like Grand Theft Auto *and some of the other amazing open world games that we have right now would go. I just thought the spectacle and the ambition of that game was amazing."*

RETRO

NO.173

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RETRO GUIDE TO...
SNES
How many of these classic games have you played?

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How £100 kick-started one of the greatest BBC Micro and Acorn Electron publishers of all time and launched the careers of gaming legends

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The curator of the National Football Museum's From Pitch To Pixel exhibit celebrates the rich history of football's gaming past from *Sensible World Of Soccer* to *FIFA 16*

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We look at what made this Capcom classic great and how it's still influencing survival horror to this day



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THE RETRO GUIDE TO...

SNES

Nintendo's follow-up to the SNES eventually dominated the 16-bit console market. Here we chart the unmissable games that every gamer should play

NINTENDO'S FIRST 8-BIT console was a tremendous success, helping to turn around the company's fortunes and making it one of the industry's most important publishers. It had virtually every big name developer and publisher producing games and a lucrative licensing deal ensured that it received a huge amount of money in the process. Despite the popularity of the NES (or Famicom as it was known in Japan) Nintendo nevertheless worked hard on its follow-up console.

Leaving nothing to chance it once again left the design to NES creator Masayuki Uemura and continued to court a great many popular developers and publishers to ensure that it had a strong range of games. In a move that seems unthinkable in light of the Wii U's performance, Nintendo had virtually every major developer working on the Super Nintendo (Super Famicom in Japan) with the exception of Sega and NEC who had their own consoles already on the market, the Mega Drive and the PC Engine.

Although it arrived later than its competitors, a solid launch line-up and some excellent later exclusives in the form of *Super Castlevania*, *Donkey Kong Country* and *Street Fighter II* ensured that the SNES eventually rose to dominance, even though Sega took the lead for some time in the States thanks to the aggressive marketing of its 16-bit console.

Today, the SNES remains highly desirable, particularly to collectors, and games are rapidly rising to insane prices. If you are able to track down the following games however, you'll begin to realise just why Nintendo's 16-bit console is so well respected.



SUPER MARIO WORLD 1990

NINTENDO EAD

Super Mario World was a brilliant calling card for the SNES. It was a massive graphical improvement over *Super Mario Bros 3*, expanded on that game's sprawling world map and introduced lovable sidekick Yoshi into the mix. While it added several new game mechanics, including the aforementioned Yoshi, it's the meticulous level design that still makes Nintendo's game such a joy to play.

PILOTWINGS 1990

NINTENDO EAD

There was nothing on the SNES quite like *Pilotwings*. It's effectively an arcade-based flight simulator and your task was to qualify in a number of different flight schools. Designed to showcase the SNES's Mode 7, *Pilotwings* looked spectacular, offering incredible rotating environments that really put you in the game. It all culminates in a rescue mission using a heavily armed chopper, but for many, the defining moment of Nintendo's game will be endlessly circling thermals in the delightfully relaxing hang gliding event.









F-ZERO 1990

NINTENDO EAD

The third and final launch game was this spectacular racer overseen by Shigeru Miyamoto. Like *Pilotwings* it used Mode 7 (in this case to deliver an astonishing sense of speed that few other games of the time could match). While the earlier difficulty levels seem tame, ramping up to expert or higher delivers an incredibly challenging racer.

ACTRAISER 1990

QUINTET

ActRaiser is a game of two halves. One takes the form of a simplistic but thoroughly entertaining sim, where you must build houses, keep your villagers happy and seal away dangerous monster lairs. The other side of *ActRaiser* is a fast-paced 2D hack-em-up that pits you against some insanely tough bosses. It's a clever two-punch and it's a pity the sim aspects were dropped for the disappointing sequel.





SIM CITY 1991

NINTENDO EAD

Nintendo licensed *Sim City* from developer Maxis and added its own unique spin in the process. The game is overseen by the enigmatic Dr. Wright, an attacking Bowser replaces Godzilla who terrorised the PC version, while the number of buildings and scenarios have been greatly expanded.

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: A LINK TO THE PAST 1991

NINTENDO EAD

A Link To The Past introduced many features that would go on to define the series, such as the Hookshot, Master Sword and Pegasus Boots. It added Link's deadly spin attack and splits up Heart Containers to tuck the fragments away in hard to find places. By far the most important change though, is the introduction of a parallel world which Link must travel between several times in order to defeat the evil Ganon.





KEV BAYLISS UPGRADES

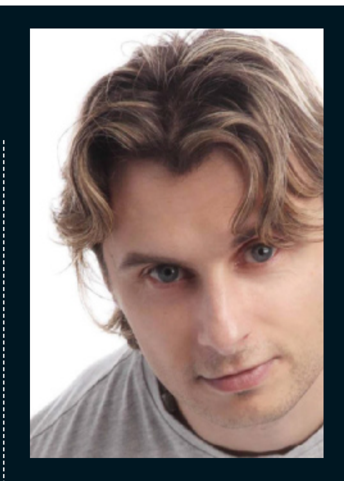
The ex-Rare staff member on moving from NES to SNES

How did the SNES compare to the NES?
Visually the SNES was capable of far more than the NES so it was much more fun to work on. The NES was actually a great little console, but it had its limitations. The SNES's improved graphics performance gave us more colours to work with for both sprites and backgrounds, and it also allowed the artist to use a transparent texture that was great for all kinds of effects.

Which SNES game do you wish you were involved with and why?
I'd have loved to have converted *Street Fighter II*, because it was my favourite game at the time. The conversion to the SNES was absolutely awesome to look at.

Why was Rare's SNES output limited compared to its NES game output?
The NES was a lot simpler to work with, and a lot of the titles we produced were licensed, so they were quite straightforward to work on. Many of those were conversions or TV game shows. I would work on two or three games at once during the days of the NES, but when the SNES came along we focused on growing the company to allow us to cope with the SNES and the addition of the Game Boy.

What was the reaction like when people witnessed *Donkey Kong Country*'s graphics for the first time?
At the time, people saw it and thought we had been 'tweaking the hardware' to allow the SNES to do things it couldn't normally do, which was a fantastic

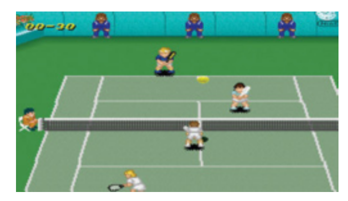


response. People just couldn't believe what they were seeing, because it was the first time the technique had really been tried.

SUPER TENNIS 1991

TOKYO SHOSEKI

It might not be the prettiest looking game, but *Super Tennis* remains an excellent rendition of the sport. There are three game modes available, including an excellent double mode, while Mode 7 is used (admittedly to rather ugly effect) to show off the tennis court. It's the sheer number of moves available that really manages to impress, while the challenging AI ensures that matches always remain satisfying.





SUPER GHOULS 'N' GHOSTS 1991

CAPCOM

Ghouls 'N' Ghosts never reached the SNES. Capcom instead released a sequel exclusively for the console that added an exceptionally good soundtrack and some truly sensational visuals. A double jump replaces Arthur's ability to shoot up, which changes the gameplay in the process, while the tough bosses are punishing to beat but never unfairly so.





UN SQUADRON 1991

CAPCOM

It loses the two-player mode and chops some of the stages around, but this remains a highly competent arcade port of Capcom's shooter. The military setting makes a nice change from the usual sci-fi backdrops other shooters feature, while there's a large array of planes and weapons to buy. Oh, and it's based on a popular manga called *Area 88*.

AXELAY 1992

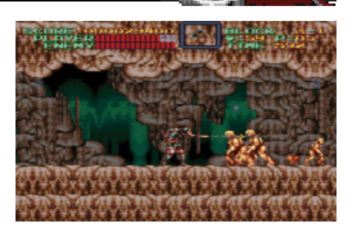
KONAMI

Konami dominated the SNES with a constant range of astonishing games. *Axelay* remains one of the best shooters on the system thanks to its well-crafted soundtrack, gobsmacking visuals and a clever weapon system that expands as the game progresses. The into-the-screen stages were critically lauded at the time, but the side-on sections are just as satisfying. It's topped off by some of the best boss encounters to ever appear on the system.



"AXELAY IS TOPPED OFF BY SOME OF THE BEST BOSS ENCOUNTERS ON THE SNES"





SUPER CASTLEVANIA IV 1991

KONAMI

It might feel a little linear at times, but this remains a superb update of the popular franchise, with a great array of terrifying bosses, lots of interesting weapons and a truly atmospheric soundtrack - one of the SNES's best in fact. It's all rounded off by smart Mode 7 effects and extremely satisfying level design.



SUPER STAR WARS 1992

SCULPTURED SOFTWARE, LUCASARTS

Forget the two sequels, this is the *Star Wars* game you should go for. The difficulty is perfectly pitched compared to the later games; you can switch between characters on certain stages, while there are some excellent Mode 7 driving and racing effects. The bosses are big and challenging and the rendition of John Williams' score is superb.



SUPER MARIO KART 1992

NINTENDO EAD

Here was perfect proof that there was more to *Mario* than just platforming. The racecourses are exceptionally well-designed and based around popular *Mario* locations, the AI constantly pushes you, and each competitor feels suitably different. It's also notable for an excellent Battle Mode where you have to destroy each other's balloons, which for some, has never been beat.





CONTRA SPIRITS 1992

KONAMI

The best *Contra* game of all time has everything you want from a great run-and-gun. The levels are tough, but fair. There's an insane amount of ridiculously over-the-top weaponry to choose from and the relentless assault from bosses never lets up. While the Mode 7 levels are showing their age a little, the side-on stages remain as fresh as ever, proving that Konami really was in a league of its own. Aesthetically it's superb too, with a truly thunderous soundtrack that perfectly matches the onscreen carnage.





SUPER DOUBLE DRAGON 1992

TECHNOS JAPAN

While there are numerous scrolling fighters on the SNES, this is easily the best. It's easy to overlook due to its incredibly ugly and garish visuals, but behind the dumpy sprites lay a truly exceptional fighting engine. A guard button is added to the mix, which really opens up on the higher difficulty levels, while the punch, kick and jump buttons can be utilised to pull off a staggering number of moves. Throw some satisfying weaponry into the mix and Technos' game proves hard to beat.



E.V.O.: SEARCH FOR EDEN 1988

RARE



This interesting platformer has a large number of RPG mechanics and is heavily based on an earlier Almanic game that was released on the PC-9801. Split across five distinct geological ages, you must slowly evolve into different forms, taking out different organisms with whatever new moves you have gained through your evolution.

CYBERNATOR 1992

NCS CORP, KONAMI

Known in Japan as *Assault Suit Valken*, *Cybernator* is a bombastic run-and-gun that features meaty weapons, huge playing areas and has you stomping around in a gigantic heavily armed mech. Your armoured death machine has a convincing weight to it as it trundles around causing destruction, while the constant enemy assaults keep you on your toes. A limp remake arrived on the PS2 in 2004.





SUPER ALESTE 1992

COMPILE

Many early shmups were plagued by slowdown on the SNES. Not so with *Super Aleste*, which throws about sprites with gleeful abandon and even has time for some funky Mode 7 effects too. There are eight different weapons to collect and power-up, a large number of stages and some suitably gigantic bosses. It's known as *Space Megaforce* in the US.





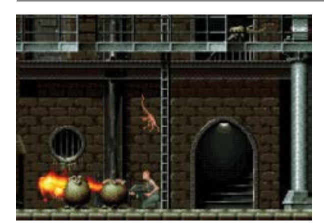
STAR FOX 1993

NINTENDO

This was the first game to showcase Nintendo's Super FX chip, which had been created by Argonaut Games. Your ship is able to switch between both first and third-person perspectives, while the bosses are gigantic and suitably imposing. Thrusters and retro rockets can control your speed allowing a degree of manoeuvrability, which isn't in similar rail shooters.

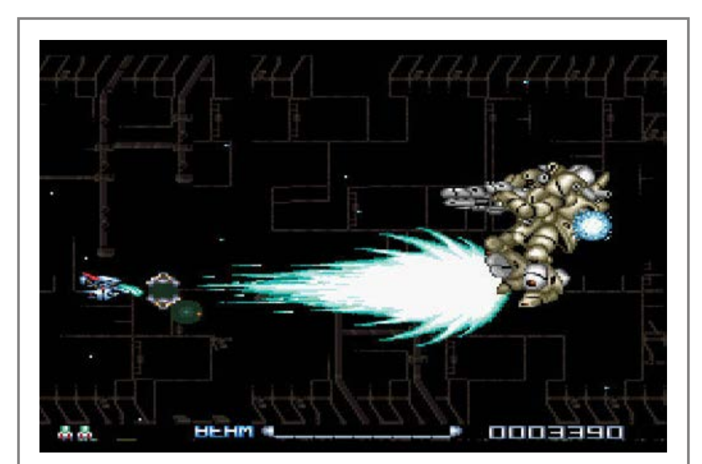
ALIEN 3 1993

PROBE ENTERTAINMENT



It shares little in common with the film, but this remains an exceptionally atmospheric *Alien* game. Visually it's gorgeous, the playing area is huge and sprawling, while there's a large amount of missions to complete, many of which can be tackled in any order. It's a world away from the Mega Drive game and far better as a result.

"ALIEN 3 IS A WORLD AWAY FROM THE MEGA DRIVE GAME AND FAR BETTER AS A RESULT"



R-TYPE III: THE THIRD LIGHTNING 1993

IREM

Crippling slowdown ruined *Super R-Type*, so it's great to see it all but eliminated in the sequel. *R-Type III* not only greatly refined the weapons and charging system of previous games, but also introduced two new forces (cool devices that bolted to the front of your ship). Fun fact: the sperm-like enemies found in the Japanese game on level two were replaced by eyeballs for the western release.

SHADOWRUN 1993

BEAM SOFTWARE





The SNES was home to many great RPGs but most originated in the East. *Shadowrun* bucked that trend, delivering an engrossing adventure that effortlessly translated the rules of the tabletop game to digital form. Beset by problems before release it was eventually launched to critical acclaim. Like many SNES RPGs it is rapidly rising in price. Fortunately, the cheaper Japanese version features English text.

THE COLLECTOR

Gemma Perkins discusses her SNES collection

Why choose to collect for the SNES?

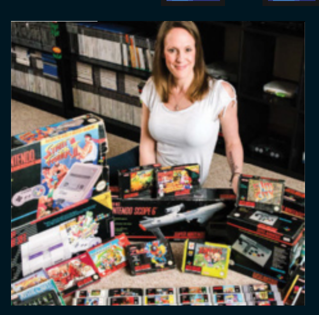
One Christmas I got the *Super Mario Allstars* boxset and the SNES has been special to me ever since. I collect for many retro gaming consoles but the SNES is by far my most desirable console.

Why are SNES games so highly priced compared to Mega Drive releases?

For me, the SNES is the superior console and I think retailers know this which bumps up prices. There are also a lot of sought after RPGs on the SNES compared to the Mega Drive. I don't remember playing any SNES RPGs as a kid. In fact, I don't remember seeing them for sale either so perhaps obscurity has got a lot to do with high prices on SNES games.

What advice would you offer to those that want to get into SNES collecting?

Cash! Make sure you have plenty of cash if you're serious about collecting for the SNES. Secondly, don't bother with any Facebook groups or eBay. SNES games rarely come up on selling sites via Facebook and the prices are way too high on eBay. Don't neglect the NTSC SNES carts. They are *much* cheaper than PAL and a lot easier to source. Decide on whether you value quality or quantity. You can have a very small SNES collection that's worth a fortune.



What's the most desirable piece in your collection and why?

Out of my SNES collection I'd go with *Mega Man X*. I have an NTSC boxed copy and although it's missing the instructions its monetary value is still very high. My very dear friends at Level Up Games sent it to me as a Christmas gift so I guess this adds to the sentiment too.

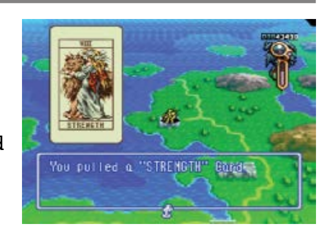
Do you collect the more expensive PAL games?

Yeah absolutely. If I want a game that badly I'd happily spend £300. I recently bought *Secret Of Evermore* boxed with the manual but the map was missing. I paid £80 which wasn't too bad. I expected to pay around £110 as it was. You can follow Gemma at www.youtube.com/thegebs24 or read her reviews at juicygamereviews.com

OGRE BATTLE: MARCH OF THE BLACK QUEEN 1993

QUEST

Named after a Queen song, *Ogre Battle* is an interesting strategy game with real-time effects that features a day-night system, ability enhancing Tarot Cards along with all the deep mechanics of an RPG. The format would change for later games that would be more SRPG-based, but it remains an excellent debut all the same.





NHL '94 1993

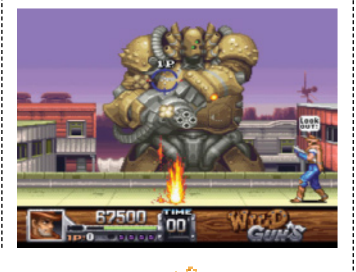
EA CANADA

EA didn't have the best reputation when it came to porting its games to the SNES. Fortunately, it pulled out the stops for *NHL '94*, delivering fast-paced gameplay, tight controls and an extremely slick graphic engine. There are a large number of gameplay modes, including a shoot-out mini-game and it introduces the excellent "one-timer" play mechanic.

WILD GUNS 1994

NATSUME

This excellent third-person shoot-em-up plays like *Cabal* and *Nam: 1975*, but has a setting that mixes cowboys with gargantuan robots to great effect. Holding down fire moves your onscreen cursor about, while releasing it allows you to dodge any incoming bullets. It's a fast and furiously paced game with excellent visuals and a great collection of power-ups.



SUPER STREET FIGHTER II: THE NEW CHALLENGERS 1994

CAPCOM

The definitive SNES *Street Fighter* game adds a brand new scoring system, includes new Time Challenge and Group Battle modes and also features the four new characters, Cammy, T-Hawk, Fei-Long and DeeJay. It all fits on a huge 32Megabit cartridge.



EARTHBOUND 1994

APE, HAL LABORATORY

While it's not worth the £500+ pricetag it currently commands, there's no denying *Earthbound* is an incredible RPG. It has a distinctive visual style and setting that immediately sets it apart from similar JRPGs, along with an excellent combat system and the ability to earn money from battles, which must then be withdrawn from an ATM.



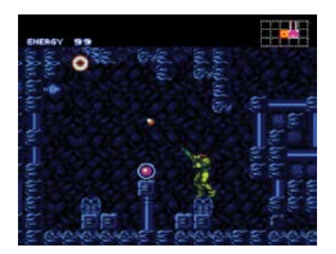


THE FIREMEN 1994

HUMAN ENTERTAINMENT

This highly engaging action game takes place during a Christmas party and sees a pair of fire fighters tackling an out of control fire. It's essentially a slick shoot-em-up with hero Pete having to avoid heat, whilst trying to work out how to extinguish the unique fire attacks of each enemy boss. A PlayStation sequel appeared in 1995.





SUPER METROID 1994

NINTENDO RR&D1

Yoshio Sakamoto's stunning sequel to *Metroid II* is a wonderfully atmospheric game that remains highly influential. Samus's abilities are well-crafted, allowing the world of Zebes to slowly open up and there are plenty of secrets to discover thanks to the excellent design. The Western release is notable for its larger box and included strategy guide.



PIECES 1994

PRISM KIKAKU

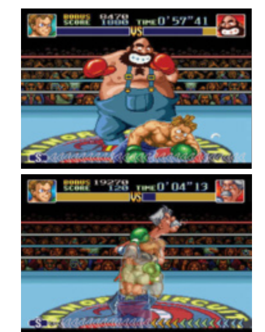
A competitive puzzle game sounds like a terrible idea, until you actually start playing it. Successfully placing pieces increases your power gauge which gives you access to a large number of power-ups that can help you or hinder your opponent. The images are a little low res, but it never impacts your progress.

FINAL FANTASY VI 1994

SQUARE

Confusingly known as *Final Fantasy III* in the West, this is arguably the best 2D game in the series. It features 14 playable characters, has a surprisingly deep story and offers a large amount of customisation via the use of Relics.





SUPER PUNCH-OUT!! 1994

NINTENDO IRD

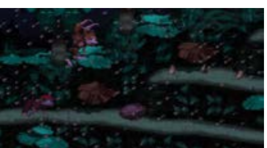
The power of the SNES enabled Nintendo to create some truly expressive boxers for its home sequel. Little Mac builds power by unleashing a flurry of punches and uppercuts while reading his opponent's tells and delivering the relevant counterattack. Special moves are available once the power bar is filled, hopefully allowing Little Mac to down the 16 progressively difficult fighters. A fun action game really would have benefitted from a two-player mode.

DONKEY KONG COUNTRY 1994

RARE

Two sequels followed on the SNES, but the original remains our favourite. It's an excellent platformer, featuring sensational rendered visuals and a truly stunning score. It features the ability to play with a second character, Diddy Kong, and adds a number of animal companions into the mix too. It went on to sell 9 million units.



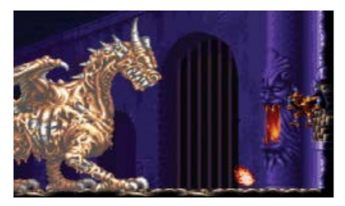


DEMON'S CREST 1994

CAPCOM

There's a lot to love about Capcom's platformer. There are three different endings to uncover, a variety of truly challenging bosses and some great Mode 7 effects. The six main areas are designed to be replayed, while mastering Firebrand's gargoyle forms presents a sufficient challenge. Sadly, it's now getting very expensive to buy.





CHRONO TRIGGER 1995

SQUARE

Square's time travelling RPG is generally considered to be one of the system's best and commands a pretty penny. It utilises an enhanced version of the Active Battle System seen in Square's *Final Fantasy* games, boasts 13 unique endings and has a host of allies and side quests to discover. It eventually received a European release on the DS.





SUPER MAD CHAMP 1995

GIVRO

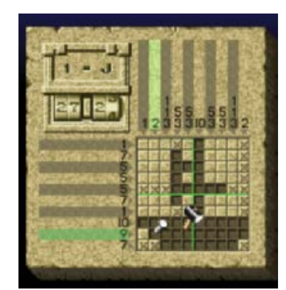
Road Rash never reached the SNES, but this Japanese exclusive is a worthy alternative. There are three courses to race in, with gold getting awarded for hitting opponents off bikes. Furthermore, should you wish to, you can leap up from your own vehicle and engage in one-on-one fisticuffs. Silly, but highly entertaining.

"WHILE NOT AS EXPENSIVE AS EARTHBOUND, THIS EXCELLENT ACTION RPG [TERRANIGMA] IS NO LESS DESIRABLE"

MARIO'S SUPER PICROSS 1995

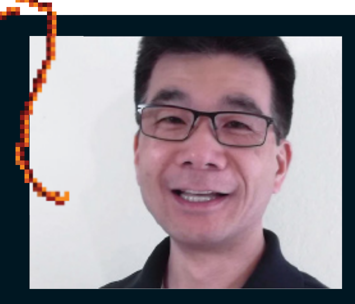
APE, JUPITER

Poor sales of *Mario's Picross* on Game Boy meant this excellent follow-up never hit the West on release. Played against the clock, the aim is to complete puzzles as quickly as possible. It's straightforward to play and certainly isn't the prettiest, but it's a highly addictive game overall.



CREATING SUPER CASTLEVANIA IV

Masahiro Ueno on Konami's SNES sequel



When did you start work on Super Castlevania IV?

I think we started *CVIV* almost as soon as we got the information from Nintendo, so we probably started the development of *CVIV* in 1989. I am not too sure though. It was more than 20 years ago! We started with a small R&D team, without actual dev kits. We only had a hard copy of specification documents.

Was there much pressure?

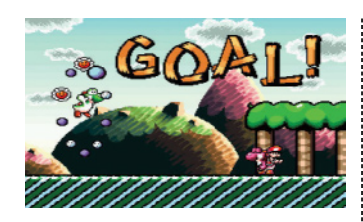
The expectations were really high, as it was already a successful franchise and now on the new 'super' hardware. Personally, I liked the original *CV* the most back then. Of course, I played them all before we finalized the direction of *CVIV*. I wanted to make *CVIV* a pure action game without any RPG elements, similar to the original *CV*.

How did you create Super Castlevania IV?

Because the team was small, everybody was involved in the design. Some ideas came from creative artists and others were from programmers' experiments. The whip feature was a big part of the game and it was experimented with and implemented by Yaipon. We drew maps on paper but I think we changed a lot as we iterated the game.

Where did the bosses originate?

I came up with rough boss ideas first and then [additional] programmers came up with more detailed patterns as they implemented. We wanted to make earlier bosses relatively easy so that the players could figure out weak points and effective weapons without retrying too many times. For some bosses and traps we decided to use Mode 7 first, then came up with ideas. I like the golem boss, simply because it uses Mode 7.



SUPER MARIO WORLD 2: YOSHI'S ISLAND 1995

NINTENDO EAD

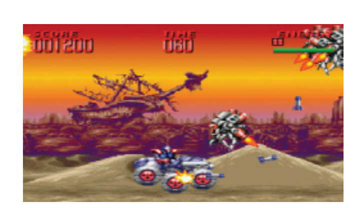
Interestingly, the *Super Mario World* prefix was added to the western releases, probably to help sales. As a result it has little in common with its namesake with Yoshi guiding baby Mario through some beautiful environments that are packed with collectibles. It has high replay value

SEIKEN DENSETSU 3 1995

SQUARE

You're probably wondering where *Secret Of Mana* is in our list. As good as it is, the sequel is miles better. In addition to the PlayStation-styled visuals and a magnificent soundtrack it also boasts multiple characters, tightens the AI and offers a far more expansive and rewarding story. An English patch exists too.





SUPER TURRICAN 2 1995

FACTOR 5

Super Turrican's sequel may dispense with the large open world of the original game, but that simply allowed Factor 5 to up the graphical ante. It features sensational graphics, excellent use of Mode 7, boasts gigantic bosses and has little to no slowdown. It's a little difficult at times, but it is hard to beat for sheer jaw-dropping spectacle.

TERRANIGMA 1995

QUINTET

While not as expensive as *Earthbound*, this excellent action RPG is no less desirable. It boasts a well crafted story that stands apart from many JRPGs, has an excellent real-time battle system and has a solid and interesting magic system. A late PAL release in December '96 means it's hard to secure.



SUPER MARIO RPG 1996

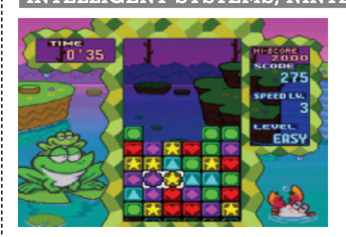
SQUARE



This late offering from Square has spawned two spiritual franchises: the *Paper Mario* series and *Mario & Luigi*. Immediately distinctive thanks to its isometric viewpoint and rendered visuals, *Super Mario RPG* features a strong story, lots of familiar characters and a robust battle system featuring now-familiar timed button presses.

TETRIS ATTACK 1996

INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS, NINTENDO R&D1

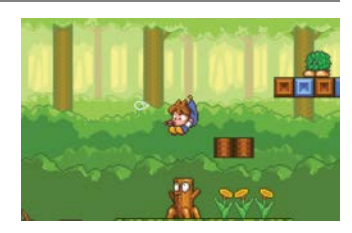


Despite its name, this has nothing to do with *Tetris*. It's in fact the first game in the *Puzzle League* series and is a slick variation on the *Match 3* game with an array of different game modes to choose from, including a maddeningly addictive Vs Mode. The latest version was released on the DS in 2009.

DOREMI FANTASY 1996

HUDSON SOFT

This musical themed game has you controlling a youngster named Milo who must navigate seven sprawling worlds. Aesthetically it's superb, with glorious looking visuals and a rich soundtrack that gives it a distinctive cartoon feel. Milo has lots of special moves, including clothing that changes colour.



J. LEAGUE '96 DREAM STADIUM 1996

HUDSON SOFT

Hudson Soft's football game shares many similarities with *International Superstar Soccer Deluxe* but it's very much its own game. It plays at a brilliant pace, the animation throughout is superb and the players have a large range of moves.





SUPER BOMBERMAN 5 1997

HUDSON SOFT

Hudson Soft's last SNES game was a fantastic way to end the *Super Bomberman* series. The single player mode is not only non-linear but also features worlds based on the earlier *Super Bomberman* games. The multiplayer mode is entertaining, featuring nine different characters and ten different maps.

AND THE REST…

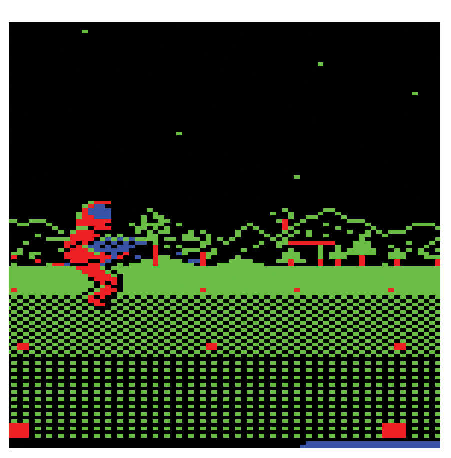
- TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: TURTLES IN TIME: KONAMI, 1991
- EQUINOX: SOFTWARE CREATIONS, 1993
- MEGA MAN X: CAPCOM 1993
- ZOMBIES ATE MY NEIGHBOURS: LUCASARTS, 1993
- UNIRALLY: DMA DESIGN, 1994
- SKYBLAZER: UKIYOTEI, 1994
- MORTAL KOMBAT 2: PROBE ENTERTAINMENT 1995
- MAGICAL POP'N: POLESTAR, 1995
- HARVEST MOON: AMCCUS, 1996











FROM HUMBLE ORIGINS TO **SUPERIOR SOFTWARE**

HOW £100 KICK-STARTED ONE OF THE GREATEST BBC MICRO AND ACORN ELECTRON PUBLISHERS OF ALL TIME

THE EIGHTIES is held in reverence as a decade of great growth and development in the gaming industry, a time of genuine opportunity. Where modern blockbuster games are the result of hundreds of staff members working in large offices with multi-million pound budgets, in the early Eighties new developers and publishers could start-up with minimal investments and very limited teams.

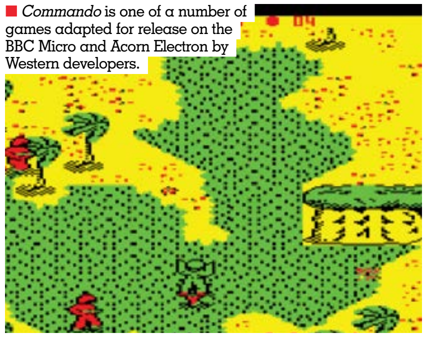
It was in this scene that now famed game developer and producer Richard Hanson founded Superior Software with John Dyson. "I'd graduated with a B.Sc. in computational science, I'd written a number of games that were sold by software publisher Program Power, and I had some knowledge of marketing and business management," Hanson shares with us. "I felt sure Superior Software would be an enjoyable, interesting enterprise." The cost for setting up this legendary company? "John Dyson and I each put £50 into the business, and this was the most that we would lose if the business had not taken off."

Being a time when a single-man developer could produce a complete game within a month, the talented duo of Hanson and Dyson quickly produced their first titles. "In autumn 1982, John and I coded Superior Software's first four games ready for publication: I wrote three of those games [*Space Fighter*, *Centibug*, and *Galaxy Birds*], and John wrote the other one [*Invaders*]." So far from the days of multi-million pound marketing campaigns, Hanson and Dyson invested their budget in the most traditional of advertising spaces: the press. "We initially placed a small black-and-white advertisement in one of the early home computer magazines – I think our first ad was in a magazine called Computing Today."

For the most part, those early games are not regarded as Superior Software's best. They did, however, prove to Hanson that success within the gaming industry was possible. "We were delighted by the response we received to our first advertisement – the level of sales covered the cost of the advertising several times over," says Hanson. "So we placed more advertisements, gradually increasing the size and taking more prominent positions in the magazines. We also started to invite other software developers to submit software to us for evaluation and possible marketing."

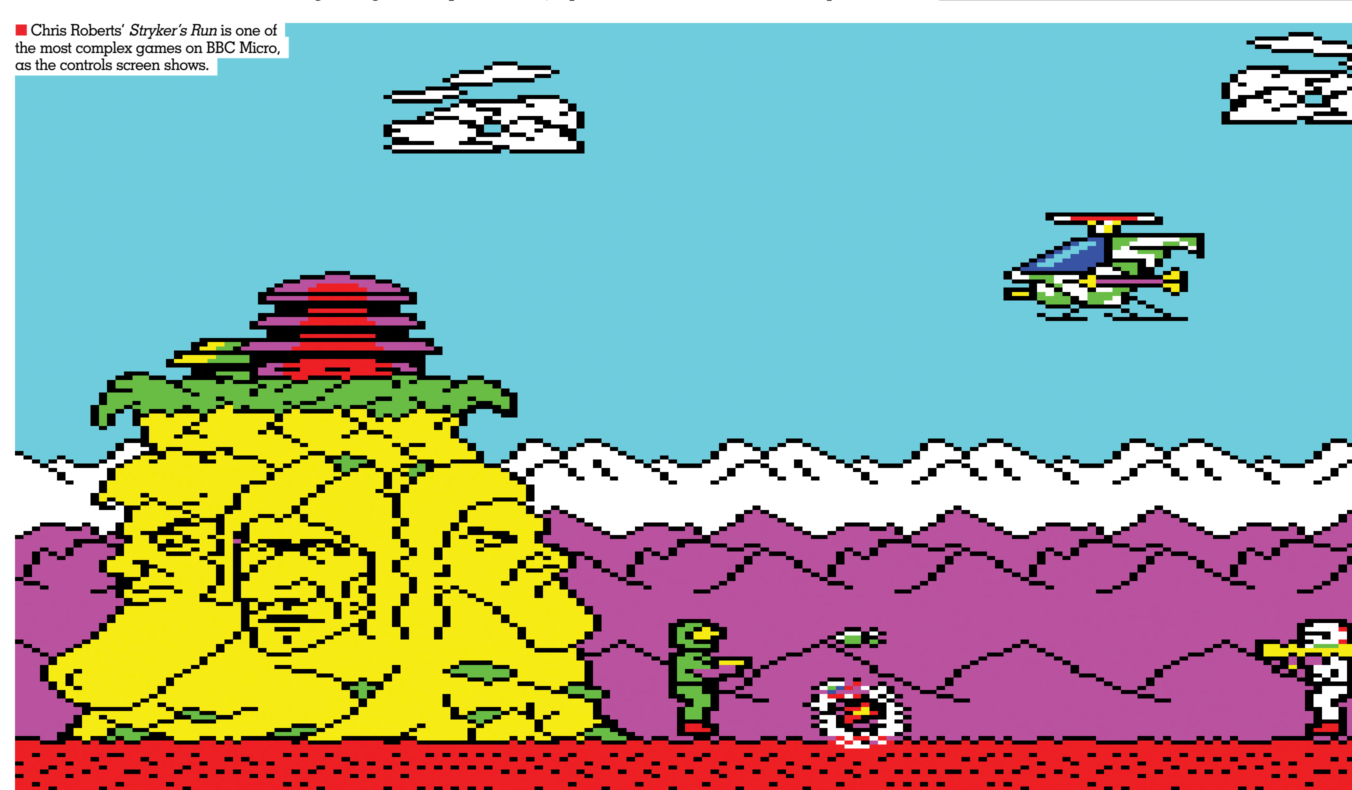


Many of those submissions came from enthusiastic university students, such as Peter Johnson, who had taught himself to program games while studying at university. "I took a HND Computer Studies course at Newcastle Polytechnic (now Northumbria University)," says Johnson [game designer for *Overdrive*]. "The coursework used COBOL and BASIC running on computer terminals and teletypes, and trained students to become systems analysts long before anyone would consider providing a dedicated games course at University." Johnson, however, was far keener to learn game design. "I had a BBC Micro, so I used the time I should have been studying to teach myself assembly language programming instead."


■ *Commando* is one of a number of games adapted for release on the BBC Micro and Acorn Electron by Western developers.

Johnson had created a BBC Micro version of classic arcade game *Q*bert*, and decided to send it out to publishers to test the waters. "I sent the game to around ten publishers only a day or two before my final exams – expecting not to hear anything for a while. Almost immediately I started getting replies and offers, so I'd rush home from exams every day to find out what was in the post." Johnson had different options

"IT WAS A MATTER OF WE DO BUSINESS WITH PEOPLE WE KNOW, LIKE AND TRUST"
Christopher John Payne


■ Chris Roberts' *Stryker's Run* is one of the most complex games on BBC Micro, as the controls screen shows.



Show-stoppers line up

Search is on for top games writer

String handler

Space and a mobile micro

ANALYSER

HI-TECH HISTORY

■ With limited marketing budget the team would go direct to the press to get the word out on its games and staff needs.

available, but says "I chose Superior Software because it was run by Richard Hanson, who was a programmer himself with several games on the market. I figured that if I got stuck on a game in the future then at least he [unlike other publishers] would be able to help."

Johnson's *Q*bert*, however, was derailed when a disconcerting letter arrived in the post. "Within a week or so of launch we received a very scary letter from Columbia Pictures, who owned Gottlieb (the original manufacturers of the game) and were themselves owned by Coca Cola," says Johnson. "They threatened legal action unless we withdrew the game. Unsurprisingly, we withdrew it. But it convinced me that there was definitely a market for games, and I continued to work with Superior on many more titles."

The first of those titles, third-person arcade racer *Overdrive*, gave Superior Software one of their most important commercial successes. "I was working on another game at the time," Johnson recalls. "It was only when Richard Hanson told me I had to do it – as he had already printed the cassette covers – that I knuckled down and got on with it. It only took a week, as the game was all about spotting the gaps between the cars as you raced past them, and didn't push the BBC hardware very hard. It used colour-cycling to give a sense of movement from the trackside markers and grass, so only the cars needed to be moved and redrawn every frame." The result was critical acclaim and commercial triumph. "This was probably my most profitable week's work for many years," says Johnson.



■ Peter Johnson developed games such as *Overdrive*, *DeathStar* and *Space Pilot* for Superior Software.



■ Matthew Atkinson developed *Repton*, a game that is still seeing sequels made today.

Adding to Superior's commercial successes were such highly praised hits as Peter Johnson's *Deathstar* – which Roland Waddilove, writing for Electron User magazine, called "a super fast, all-action arcade classic… the sort of game you can't put down" – and *Hunchback*, of which Hanson himself says, "It's an engrossing game. At first it can seem quite tricky, but after practice and perseverance most players find it becomes much easier to progress through the various levels of the game." It's Johnson's *Overdrive*, however, that Hanson considers the most important of Superior Software's early games. "I'm not sure how many sales *Hunchback* achieved in total, but it was certainly a helpful stepping stone for Superior at the time. *Overdrive*, however, was even more important as a major sales success."

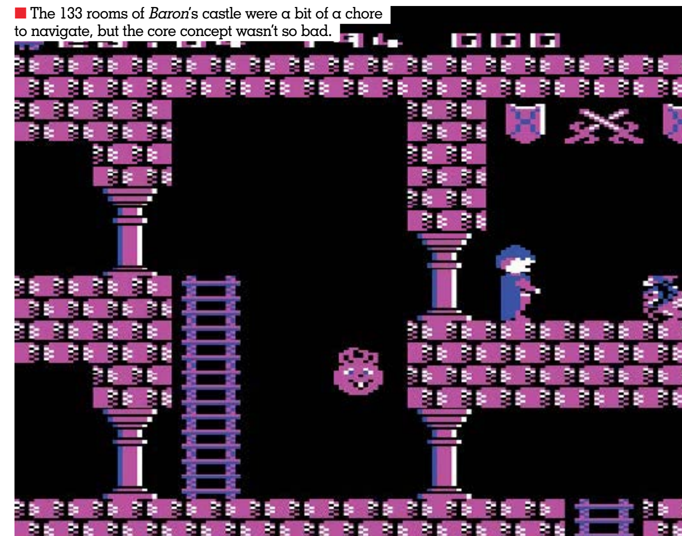
"SUPERIOR SOFTWARE CAN JUSTIFIABLY SAY THEY WERE THE BEST BBC MICRO AND ELECTRON GAMES COMPANY IN THE COUNTRY AT THAT TIME"
Matthew Atkinson

By 1984 Superior Software was producing some truly notable BBC Micro and Acorn Electron titles that were generating positive critical reception. Yet the future looked uncertain for the growing publisher and the company was in need of a commercial facelift and a marketing overhaul. It was then that Christopher John Payne, fresh from completing a degree in Business Studies at Leeds Poly, happened to bump into Hanson. "I bumped into Richard in the high street in Headingly in Leeds," says Payne [former marketing specialist for Superior Software]. "We got talking. He was saying that things were [challenging] in the games industry at the time. He was thinking of doing something different, like opening a record shop. 'Business is challenging at Superior', Richard said. 'I see it going downhill from here so I need to do something different.' So I came onboard and we shared an office together."

Payne saw weaknesses in Superior Software's marketing strategy. "Richard's advertising and packaging was very harsh and very angular – the logo was using Bauhaus typeface, and the illustrations we're unattractive." Payne had previously been working at competing games publisher Micro Power, and so had an inside view on what type of packaging and marketing was most successful in games at the time. "At Micro Power I had changed the packaging to a far more art-based style with an artistic looking title for the product, so there would be almost a 3D look to the artwork."



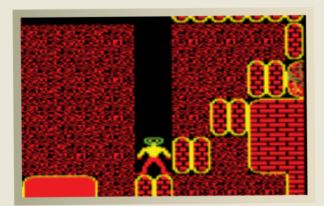
■ Building on the mechanics of *Quest* and *Citadel*, *Camelot* was originally part of a *Play it Again Sam 9* compilation.



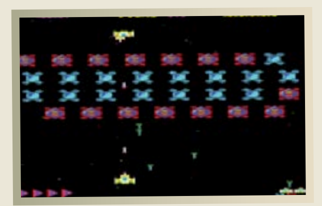
■ The 133 rooms of *Baron*'s castle were a bit of a chore to navigate, but the core concept wasn't so bad.

SUPERIOR SOFTWARE'S MOST IMPORTANT GAMES

Superior Software released many of the best BBC Micro and Electron games ever. Here's a look at some of its best works.



REPTON
by Tim Tyler (1985): Puzzle game by teen Tim Tyler that became Superior Software's most important game.



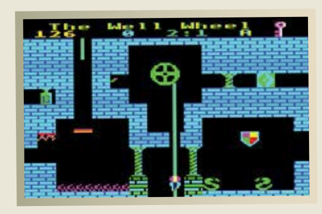
GALAFORCE
by Kevin Edwards (1986): A futuristic, arcade-style shoot 'em up game set in the distant 25th Century.



PALACE OF MAGIC
by Martyn R Howard (1987): Problem-solving game where you restore a character to its original size to teleport home.



OVERDRIVE
by Peter Johnson (1984): An arcade racing games that was one of Superior Software's first commercial successes.



CITADEL
by Michael Jakobsen (1985): Puzzle-platformer that utilised Speech to vocally pronounce the title.



STRYKER'S RUN
by Chris Roberts (1986): A trhilling 2D side-scrolling action game that takes place in a futuristic war.



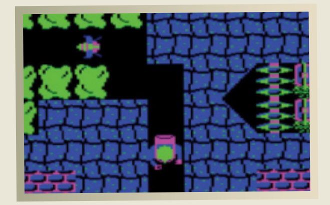
BONECRUNCHER
by Andreas Kemnitz (1987): A tricky little puzzle game that cleverly utilises *Boulder Dash*-style mechanics.



ELITE
by David Braben & Ian Bell (1984): Classic space-trader and one of the first games to use wire-frame 3D graphics.



THRUST
by Jeremy Smith (1986): 2D platform-based shooter where players control a spaceship by rotating and thrusting.

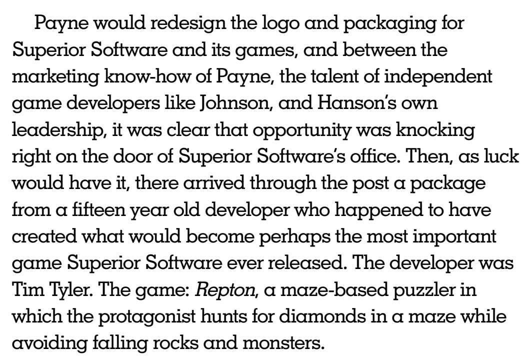


RAVENSKULL
by Martin Edmondson and Nicholas Chamberlain (1986): Enter Castle Ravenskull to retrieve a stolen silver crucifix.



EXILE
by Peter Irvin and Jeremy Smith (1988): One of the most complex games on Micro, the first to use a physics engine.





Payne would redesign the logo and packaging for Superior Software and its games, and between the marketing know-how of Payne, the talent of independent game developers like Johnson, and Hanson's own leadership, it was clear that opportunity was knocking right on the door of Superior Software's office. Then, as luck would have it, there arrived through the post a package from a fifteen year old developer who happened to have created what would become perhaps the most important game Superior Software ever released. The developer was Tim Tyler. The game: *Repton*, a maze-based puzzler in which the protagonist hunts for diamonds in a maze while avoiding falling rocks and monsters.

"We were very pleased indeed to receive this software. It was clearly a beautifully designed, stimulating game," says Hanson. "We knew it was destined to do well." Payne shares similar sentiments. "[On receiving *Repton*] I thought 'Oh my gosh this is similar to *Boulder Dash* [Atari's classic arcade puzzler]'. I thought it would be a real hit."

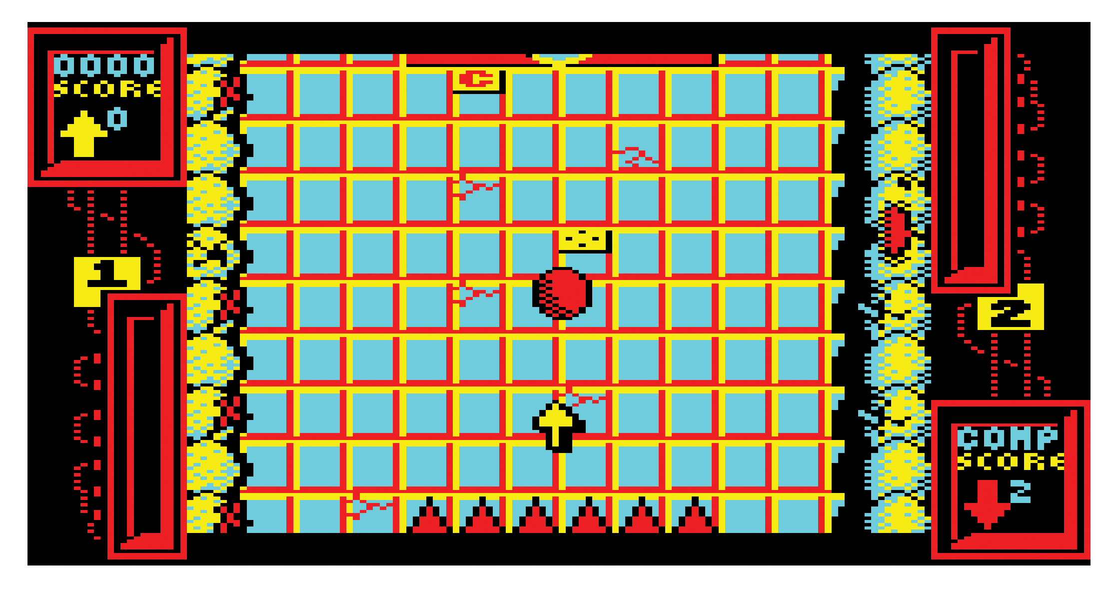
Being such a well designed game, the team at Superior Software changed very little of the program Tim Tyler sent them. "I brought in Mike Ellis [an artist Payne had worked with at Micro Power] and showed him the sort of illustrations I was looking for," says Payne. "He produced a really nice piece of art to go with it. We gave it a spit and polish, but only changed about five to ten percent."

With beautiful packaging and scintillating game design, *Repton* would become one of the biggest commercial successes on the BBC Micro and Acorn Electron, and would spawn multiple sequels on a variety of platforms. Amazingly, those sequels – which span thirty-one years – have undergone only the most minimal of changes, most notably with the inclusion of a level designer in *Repton 3* – "I suggested to Richard to put in a level designer, and that really made the difference because people could create their own levels for players to solve," says Payne.

It is testament to Tim Tyler's original design that the core gameplay of *Repton* remains the same even today, and that Superior Software continues to develop and sell new versions of *Repton* on their website **SuperiorInteractive.com**. As Hanson makes clear, the contribution of one talented fifteen year old developer, Tim



■ The Acorn Electron was the best selling Micro in the UK, besting its sibling, the BBC Micro.



HOW SUPERIOR SOFTWARE GOT HOLD OF SO MANY GREAT GAMES

Superior Software received submissions from many of the best game developers of the Eighties. Here's how.

The gaming industry in the Eighties was very different to how it is today. Where today talented programmers and designers are headhunted every day by developers and publishers, back in the Eighties most talented developers were sitting at home writing line after line of code to create their own games. The likes of Matthew Atkinson and Peter Johnson had written several games at home that were just waiting to be picked up.

Superior Software took advantage of the situation by directly asking "Can You Write Games?"

As Chris Payne states, "[I wrote a] "Can You Write Games" advert… I had a sequence of cartoon drawings of people writing at home and eventually [having their work] turned into a bestselling game. I encouraged people to write in and get a copy of a booklet that I had written. The booklet was a guide to creating great games, showing how to come up with ideas and what the process of writing games and getting them made was. Richard [Hanson] sent out hundreds of these ads, and that encouraged people to send in games."

This ad was a beautifully simple way of connecting the publisher to the developers long before the days of Facebook and Twitter. Thanks to this ad, Superior Software received hundreds of submissions, some of which turned into the classic games that many retro gamers so fondly remember.

Tyler, became one of the landmark moments in Superior Software's history. "The *Repton* series of games (*Repton 1*, *Repton 2*, *Repton 3*, *Repton Infinity*, and extra level sets for *Repton 3*) is Superior's biggest success in both overall sales and rewarding customer compliments," says Hanson. "Personally, I think the *Repton* games are the best puzzle-solving games I have ever experienced, and a number of our customers have given similar comments."

Repton made Superior Software leaders of the puzzle genre, and that position would only strengthen with 1985's *Citadel*, Michael Jakobsen's puzzle-platformer in which players must find five crystals hidden in a castle and return them to their rightful place.

Citadel was a masterfully designed game, but managed to separate itself from the pack, thanks to its innovative use of the incredible voice generating software Speech. "Speech was originally a chip-based software synthesiser," says Payne. "It was only going to be sold on chip. [The problem was] you had to lift the lid off the BBC Micro and carefully push the chip in, and if you weren't careful you could break a leg – then you had a real problem. People were very wary about putting those in. I thought, 'Why don't we make it a RAM base, so you just load it in from tape.' I got the inspiration from America with SAM [Software Automatic Mouth]. SAM was a cassette based software synthesiser and had been very successful."

The move to RAM made Speech much more accessible and gave *Citadel* a mark of distinction. As Payne says, "[Thanks to Speech], the loading screen said 'Citadel' with a digitised voice, which was something you very rarely got in the Eighties, so that made it look like it was going to be a really good game."

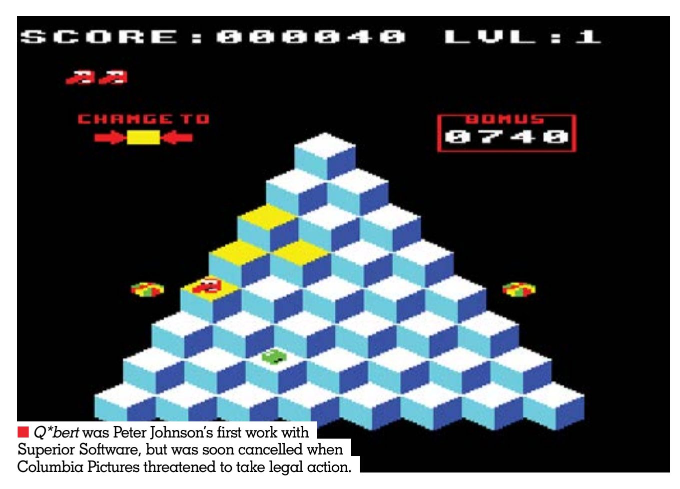
Technical innovations like Speech helped to set Superior Software apart from rival publishers and led to an influx of talented personnel and game designers eager to work with the company. As Hanson recounts, "Superior's personnel included Steve Botterill, Chris Payne and Steven Hanson. And there have been many key [game designers] including: Tim Tyler, Peter Johnson, Martin Edmondson and Nicholas Chamberlain (*Ravenskull* and *Codename Droid*), Chris Roberts (*Stryker's Run*), Kevin Edwards (*Crazee Rider* and *Galaforce*), Matthew Atkinson (*Tempest* and *Repton 3*), Peter Scott (for some very skilful conversions), David Braben (for *Zarch* soon after the launch of Acorn's Archimedes computer), and in later years David Bratton, Darren Izzard and Ian Rees."

Thanks to this growing roster of game designers and Hanson's own direction, Superior Software came to dominate the Micro and Electron scenes in the late Eighties, putting out six of the top ten bestselling BBC Micro games of 1987, and releasing Exile in 1988, which, as Matthew Atkinson [programmer on *Repton 3*] says, "has been described as the first ever computer game to employ a physics engine." But the team would face a significant challenge at the birth of the fourth generation of video games, when consoles like the TurboGrafx-16 and, later, the SNES and Mega Drive, led to a complete change of landscape for the gaming industry.

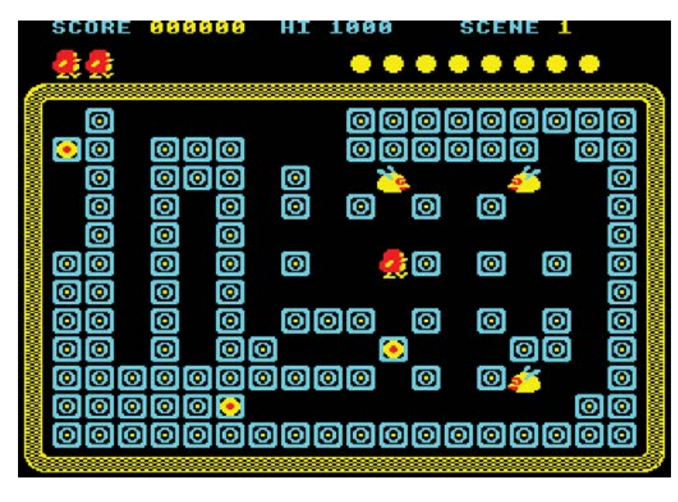
Hanson and his team had always been fully committed to Acorn development – "We published several titles for other computers, such as the Commodore 64, Sinclair Spectrum and Commodore Amiga… but we kept coming back to the Acorn computers – at that time they were the computers that we really enjoyed and knew best," says Hanson. But time was running out for the BBC Micro and Acorn Electron, and as Atkinson says, "The writing was on the wall for the 8 bit machines in the late Eighties."

Throughout the fourth generation of video games, developers and publishers were forced to close shop, unable to compete with the larger developers and the escalating price of games development. "The games were





■ *Q*bert* was Peter Johnson's first work with Superior Software, but was soon cancelled when Columbia Pictures threatened to take legal action.





■ *Karate Combat* found itself in steep competition with the likes of *Yie Ar Kung Fu* and *Karate Champ*.



becoming more sophisticated, it started to take longer and longer to make them, and [larger companies] were using in-house teams with salaries," says Payne. "The business changed. The sheer cost of development of 16 bit games was probably what stopped Superior Software [from creating games on 16-bit systems]." However, Hanson states, "If Acorn Computers had produced their own games console we would have created software for it." That, however, was not to be.

Superior Software had been born in a time of great opportunity in the gaming industry. In 1982 it was possible to put £100 into a bank to kick-start a games company, and to see that company go from strength to strength through a combination of business acumen, hard work and ingenuity, even growing to such a height that, as Atkinson states, "Superior Software can justifiably say they were the best BBC Micro and Electron games company in the country at that time." By 1990, those days were gone and a new era of large-scale developers with much higher budgets had taken over.

And yet, even despite the almost insurmountable competition, Superior Software has survived to this day. The team, rebranded under the name Superior Interactive, continues to create new versions of their old games. "Our current games have a keen following of fans, particularly for the *Repton* series," says Hanson. "There are currently PC and iOS versions of *Repton* games available, and we are planning to release an Android version of *Repton 1* soon."

Through it all, Superior Software has consistently defied the odds and survived the fiercest of climates. But what is most poignant about Superior Software's story is that it wasn't the scale of the developer, nor their budget, that made the publisher a success. By all accounts, the principle factor in Superior Software's rise, dominance, and enduring survival, was the professionalism and honesty of one man: Richard Hanson.

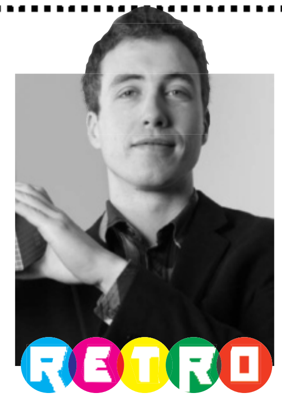
> **"IF ACORN COMPUTERS HAD PRODUCED THEIR OWN GAMES CONSOLE WE WOULD HAVE CREATED SOFTWARE FOR IT"**
> **Richard Hanson**

What was Superior Software's winning strategy? "Choosing the right games to publish for the public, and behaving in a trustworthy manner for developers," says Johnson. "You heard plenty of horror stories from this time of publishers that would treat developers badly, although I saw very little of it myself." Payne agrees. "It was a matter of we do business with people we know, like and trust. People liked Richard and trusted him. He was very straight forward and honest. He was very efficient at paying royalties. And so he had a loyal set of people. Richard truly was one of the good guys in this business."

■ Chris Payne brought his marketing knowledge to the company, helping it to grow.

■ Richard Hanson still works at the publisher, now known as Superior Interactive.


Huge varieties of football computer games have been released over the years; can you see your favourite in this collection?
See more at Pitch to Pixel: The World of Football Gaming
Level 3, free admission
FOOTBALL MANAGER 2013
TOTAL CLUB MANAGER 2003
SOUTH AFRICA
FOOTBALL MANAGER 2010
FIFA 06
FOOTBALL MANAGER 2005
FOOTBALL MANAGER 2008
FIFA 12
CLUB FOOTBALL
ENGLAND
MANCHESTER UNITED EUROPE
THE MATCH
SOCCER
LMA Manager 2006
CLUB FOOTBALL 2005
FOOTBALL MANAGER 2011
FIFA 95
PREMIER MANAGER 97
WORLD OF SOCCER
THE BIG GAME
THREE LIONS



INTERVIEW JOHN O'SHEA

The curator of the From Pitch to Pixel exhibition at the National Football Museum discusses football games' rich history and how modern titles influence the sport



How did the idea for Pitch to Pixel: The World of Football Gaming come about?

A lot of people my age – I'm in my mid-thirties – have witnessed an incredible progression in football games throughout their lives. In the last three or four years it has been really apparent that games are starting to influence the sport itself. As art curator at the National Football Museum it seemed the perfect opportunity to show how games and football are now intertwined – they have become part of the story of football.

WE TRIED TO PICK GAMES THAT WERE EITHER PIONEERING IN SOME WAY OR REPRESENTED A PARTICULAR ERA OF GAMING

In which ways do games influence the professional sport?

During the transfer window it is not just sports journalists being asked to talk about potential transfers – quite often it is professional games players or people from companies like EA Sports and Sports Interactive. In 2014 Sports Interactive licensed its database to Prozone, the company which provides stats to the coaches and scouts in the Premier League. We have a document about this in the exhibition. That point where the gaming database is actually richer and more detailed than real life… that's just astonishing, isn't it? Some of the things which are happening in these games reflect things which are happening more widely in society: the way that data is used, the way that people's images are captured and the way that movement is tracked within modern games – football gaming seems to be in some ways at the pinnacle of all these technological changes that are now dominating our lives.

You often hear fans reference how well some relatively unknown players perform in *Football Manager*, for example.

Football Manager is almost like a secret world of knowledge for fans – and the scouting system is so sophisticated that clubs rely on it when they consider transfer targets. A young Lionel Messi appeared in the database of an earlier version of the game as a 15-year-old and was recognised as an incredible player before anyone knew who he was: fans were putting him into the Barcelona first team and he was scoring a lot of goals! We have a short video about it in the exhibition. With data protection and employment laws it is more difficult these days to include youth team players in these games, but it illustrates the point.

EXHIBITION HIGHLIGHTS



Soccer (1979) Intellivision



Championship/Football Manager (1992-present) Sports Interactive



Pro Evolution Soccer 5 (2005) Konami



■ Rarely will you ever see a copy of *Pro Evo* given such respect, but *PES 5* was one of the all-time great games in the series.



■ Scrolling was a feature of *Soccer* on the Intellivision, which – unlike Atari's games – aimed to be as realistic as possible.

EA AND SPORTS INTERACTIVE

"John explains how two of gaming's most illustrious companies became involved in From Pitch to Pixel. "The National Football Museum approached some of the major game manufacturers to ask them if they would take part in an exhibition and they were very supportive. The Arts Council are also on board, which is unusual given the commercial involvement. The exhibition has been a labour of love for me, an opportunity to detail the rich history of football gaming.""



■ Former England centre-half Rio Ferdinand was furious when he saw his pace stats had dropped to just 58%.

Even professional players seem to be obsessed with *FIFA* these days.

They have these ratings for Ultimate Team within *FIFA*. When they come out, the players themselves are not always entirely happy with them – we all like to think we're a little bit faster or better than we really are, I suppose. When former Manchester United defender Rio Ferdinand was playing for QPR his running stats went below 60% and he was really angry about this – so he ripped his stats board in half! We have that in the exhibition. These two worlds are colliding.

In the exhibition you feature a TV advert in which Intellivision openly compared the sports games on its system as better than Atari's. How has the conversation around football games changed over the years?

What you see is the same debate that goes on today: what is more important, playability or realism? The big debate now is *Pro Evolution Soccer* versus *FIFA*, with people saying: 'This aspect may be more real, but this aspect is more fun.' At the very beginning, toy manufacturer Mattel – known for making Barbies – saw that games that you can plug into your television would be another part of family entertainment.

They made this console, the Mattel Intellivision, which was one of a number on the market at that time, and their marketing slogan for *Soccer*, or *NASL Soccer* as it was known in the US, was: 'The closest thing to the real thing.' At that time, that meant stick figures running around on a field. It was one of the first games where the whole of the game environment wasn't on the one screen; this was the late 70s when *Pac-Man* and *Space Invaders* were dominating the arcades. Scrolling was held up as a feature of the game! The technology then was quite pioneering – these days it is a fundamental part of our computing experience, such as swiping on our iPads.

Compared with the football games on the Atari 2600, it feels like a simplified version of *Matchday II* or *Emlyn Hughes International Soccer* on the 8-bit systems.

Yes, it's not a million miles away from those later games. Atari was an utterly different type of company, the first real computer gaming company coming out of California and understood at that stage that the essence of games had to be quite simple – and also they weren't afraid to play with unusual geometric colours and shapes rather than trying to make it real. *Pelé's Soccer* is a hugely playable game which is competitive in a similar way to *Pong*.

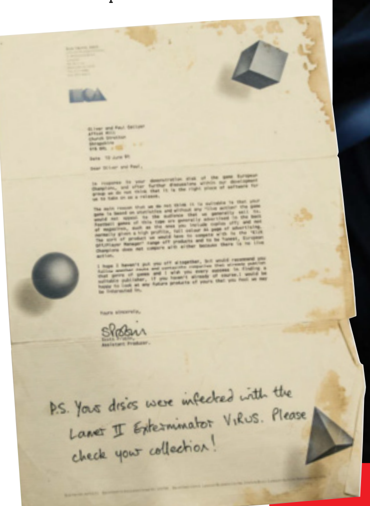
What Atari did is quite clever because they put the players in a triangle formation – anyone who's into football coaching knows the triangle is a key factor in moving the ball around – and mapped that simple element onto a game. They were also clever in getting Pelé to endorse it – the key figure at that time representing everything that was cool about football, in America as well as in Europe.

Has playability been sacrificed somewhat in recent years in that quest for realism?

The lengths that EA go to in order to make *FIFA* as realistic as possible are extreme. In the exhibition we've got the 3D motion capture suits worn by Lionel Messi and Sergio Agüero in making the game – they allow EA to mimic their gestures and movements accurately. However, that really enhances the game: there is no doubt it makes it more fun to play. In the 80s, when I was growing up, you plugged in a game and it was arcade-style – you didn't invest a lot into it after that. Children, teenagers and adults now who are really into these games invest hours, weeks, months and years into them – so the efforts made by manufacturers to enhance this world in which they participate is so worthwhile. As an older person who appreciates games looking back through time, I personally like the arcade-style experience – but I'm a dinosaur in that respect!

So, how did you select the various playable games for the exhibition?

We didn't want to just pick what we thought were the best ten games. We tried to pick games that


P.S. Your discs were infected with the Lamer II Exterminator ViRuS. Please check your collection!

"Football games of this type are generally advertised in the back of magazines… it does not compare with *Kick Off.*"

The National Football Museum celebrates the beautiful game in all its forms.

GAMES ARE STARTING TO INFLUENCE THE SPORT ITSELF… THEY HAVE BECOME PART OF THE STORY OF FOOTBALL

were either pioneering in some way or represented an era of gaming – and which translated into an experience you could have in a gallery. Some of the games we left out, like *Emlyn Hughes* on the Commodore 64, you could spend hours honing in your bedroom. They would have been more difficult to pick up and play.

Sensible Soccer on the Amiga was a no-brainer, as *SWOS* was the first game to successfully combine arcade-style gameplay with management. *Nintendo World Cup* is an odd one, on the face of it: we included that because it came bundled with the NES, the console which brought games to the mass market, so a lot of people have played it – and because it is so alien compared to a game you might play now! It doesn't attempt to be realistic, with wrestling-type characters that are difficult to control, marauding around the pitch. It doesn't take itself too seriously.

Dream Soccer on the Dreamcast was the last game where you could play as a female footballer until *FIFA 16* – you couldn't pick a women's team for a whole generation from the year 2000. We've also got a Game Boy Advance one called *Go! Go! Beckham!* which is a more conventional platform game like *Sonic & Knuckles* but using a football.

Then there's *FIFA* on the Mega Drive and *Pro Evo 5* on the PlayStation 2…

There's a bench near where *Pro Evolution 5* is set up that I regularly have to move back to its place because groups from all over the world move and gather around it to play a tournament, probably like they did in their University days! That series was hugely popular and also had a cult following, with people thinking 'I'm making the connoisseur's choice here' when that massive battle was going on in the mid-2000s with *FIFA*. EA will be the first to admit that they probably took their eye off the ball at that stage, thinking they held all the licences so no one could touch them.

What about some of the other exhibits?

We've an interactive game controller by a German artist called the 'Leg Shocker' – if you're playing a game like *FIFA* or *Pro Evo* and get tackled, you feel the pain of the tackle! No one in their right mind would want that – the artists were making the point that we say we want these games to be realistic, but we really want escapism. 'Hit It!' captures your selfie at the highest point when you jump to head a ball – nobody comes out well in the pictures from that! You can also put yourself on the cover of *FIFA*, which is something fans have really appreciated.

Tell us about the rejection letter EA sent to the Collyer brothers when they pitched *Championship Manager*.

When we met up with the guys from Sports Interactive they handed us a file with 'old stuff' written on it, containing all sorts from the development of *Championship Manager* and *Football Manager*. In among that was this fairly scathing letter from when they were trying to find a publisher for the original game they had made in their bedroom. For a museum curator, it was like finding gold dust! You can't really blame EA, they wanted to develop live-action type games… but it's fascinating how this management game has gone on to become an astonishing global phenomenon. EA did them a favour, really, as they were able to realise their own vision about this world they wanted to create. EA were good sports about us including the letter in the exhibition.

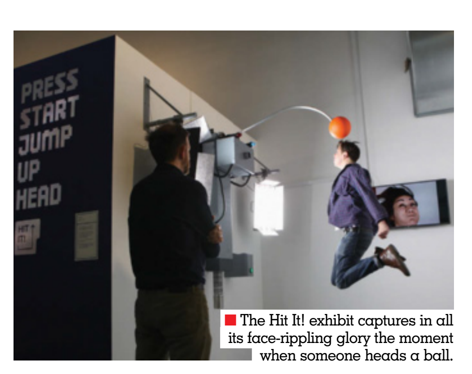
We particularly enjoyed the handwritten note at the bottom scolding them for accidentally including a virus on the disk!

Incredible, isn't it? We've actually got a brilliant *Football Manager* experiment going called '100 Managers in 100 Days'. Every day in the gallery, leading up to its end, a different person will take charge of AFC Wimbledon on the latest version of the game – we're trying to see how successful the team are. The minimum amount of time which could have been dedicated would have been 100 hours but some people who sign up are coming in and spending a whole day on the game. Someone jokingly said to me '100 hours? I need 100 hours to set up my team before I even start!'

How is the team doing?

Well, the manager got sacked and took charge of Leeds United!





The Hit It! exhibit captures in all its face-rippling glory the moment when someone heads a ball.

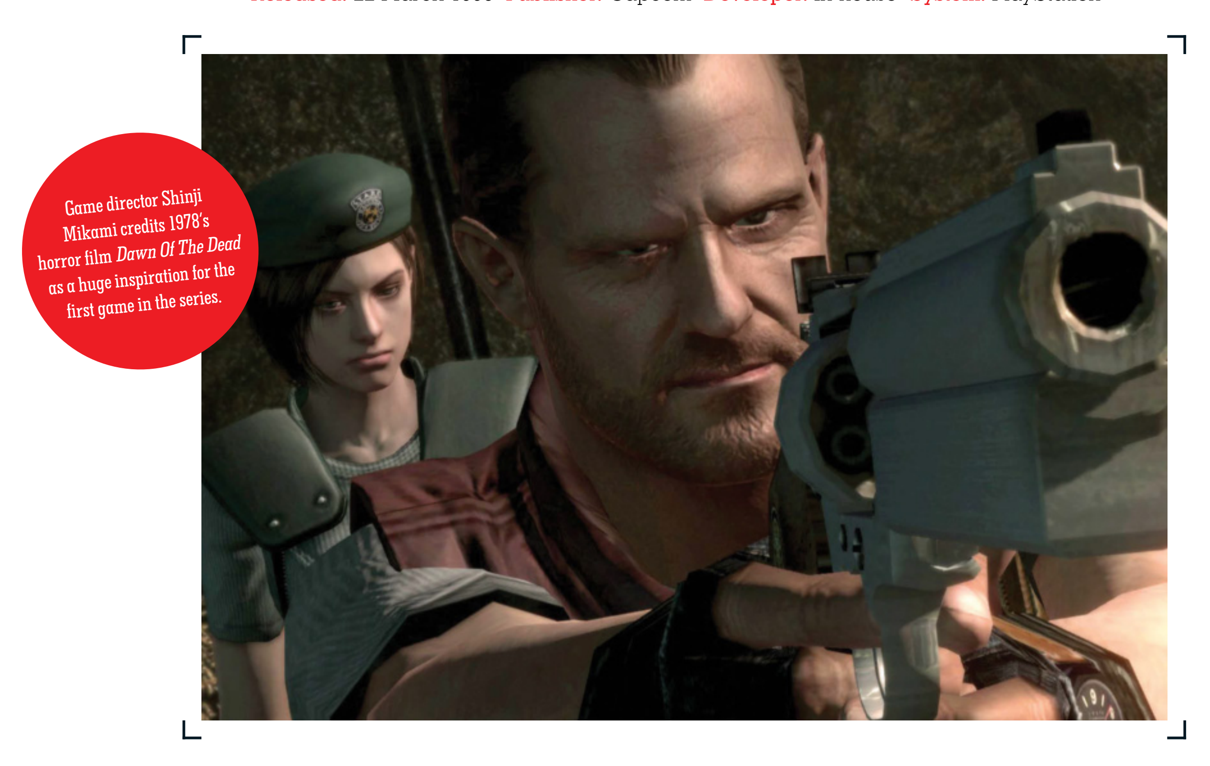


Visitors enjoy a game of *Sensible Soccer* 24 years after it debuted on the Amiga, Atari ST and PC.

GAME CHANGERS

RESIDENT EVIL

Released: 22 March 1996 **Publisher:** Capcom **Developer:** In-house **System:** PlayStation



Game director Shinji Mikami credits 1978's horror film *Dawn Of The Dead* as a huge inspiration for the first game in the series.

Exploding onto the gaming landscape two decades ago, Resident Evil established the survival horror genre with its blend of jump scares and considered combat

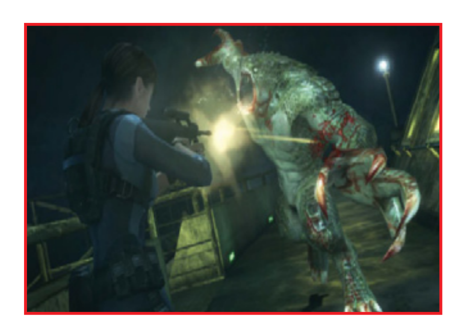
SURVEY THE wreckage of the *Resident Evil* brand in 2016 and you'd be hard pressed to find a reason for resuscitation. It's a bloated disaster of entangled timelines, conspiracy conditions, and B-movie nonsense that seems to actively seek out new ways to irritate its fervent fan base. Still, were you to rewind time by 175 - 200 hours, you'd be looking at something of a different story: *Resident Evil* shambled out of the shadows and into the spotlight for the very first time, changing the landscape of gaming forever.

It did it quickly, too; *Resident Evil* was an instant success in every territory it invaded throughout 1996, helping to shift millions of PlayStation consoles and establishing itself as one of the best-selling games of the fifth generation. Prospective players rallied behind what Capcom would later dub as the advent of 'survival horror'. Gamers were stunned by *Resident Evil*'s evocative visual and sound design, and it wasted no time in perpetuating a foreboding sense of anxiety throughout every single one of its claustrophobic corridors and forboding torture rooms. It should come as no surprise, then, that *Resident Evil* debuted as one of the first PlayStation games to receive a Mature rating from the ESRB. It's a violent, horrifying jaunt into the unknown – and it doesn't let up. Seeing STARS Alpha member Joseph Frost graphically torn apart by Cerberus was shocking back in 1996, and though that original FMV intro has become legend for all of the wrong reasons – voice acting in the 90s was a little different – it was a telling start to the horrors that were to come.

That's exactly how game director Shinji Mikami wanted *Resident Evil*: terrifying, unpredictable, yet grounded in reality. Originally brought to life as a spiritual successor to Capcom's legendary *Sweet Home* (often heralded as the forerunner to the survival horror genre), *Resident Evil* was designed to be a horror game that wasn't as reliant on the same supernatural shenanigans that fuelled that 1989 RPG and the likes of *Alone In The*

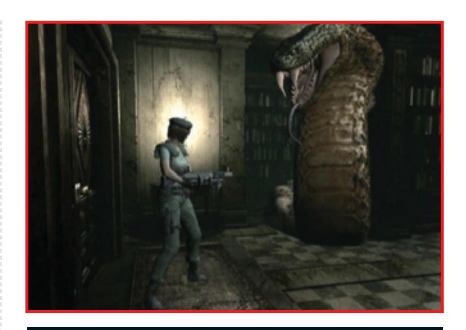
SCARIEST ENEMIES

RESIDENT EVIL IS FULL OF SOME PRETTY TERRIFYING ENEMIES, BUT THESE ARE THREE THAT STILL HAUNT US



HUNTER

★ For a good amount of *Resident Evil*, you are left to face off with the easy-to-defeat walking dead, though it isn't long before you come across the reptilian Hunters – mutated humans that require you to master your shotgun skills if you want to survive.



YAWN

★ Capcom cleverly liked to play on common phobias in *Resident Evil*, like snakes with fangs bigger than your head. Yawn, the giant, T-Virus infected snake tears through S.T.A.R.S members, before two fateful encounters in the Attic and Library.



NEPTUNE

★ As if we needed another reason to not return to the water after watching *Jaws*, Neptune comes along and scars us for life. An infected shark that surpasses the Great White in size, and proves to be one of the most challenging battles in the game.

Dark. And so Mikami introduced the world to the T-virus outbreak – turning the infected dead of Raccoon City into monstrous zombies that stalked Chris Redfield and Jill Valentine through the Spencer Mansion.

Gore, guns, and inventory management fuelled *Resident Evil*'s action, but it was the jump scares that cemented it in history. Who could ever forget the first encounter with the pair of Cerberus dogs in the Spencer Mansion? You're moving confidently through a corridor – inspecting the statue with the Map of the First Floor on the vase – before two horrors come crashing through the windows. That was the first time we experienced how powerful true fear can be in interactive entertainment, and every studio in the world, including Capcom itself, has struggled to recreate the momentum and captivating atmosphere of these original *Resident Evil* moments.

The now infamous tank controls and fixed-camera only helped enhance the feeling of hopelessness in the mission at hand. Combat was always a desperate struggle, as players wrestled with the basic third-person mechanics to put a bullet in the head of the walking dead, mutated reptilian Hunters and even an array of infected creatures. This combined surprisingly well with lateral thinking puzzles, forcing you to rearrange paintings, solve environmental mysteries and generally press switches in the vague hope that it wouldn't trigger your untimely death.

IT SHOULD COME AS NO SURPRISE THAT RESIDENT EVIL DEBUTED AS ONE OF THE FIRST PLAYSTATION GAMES TO RECEIVE A MATURE RATING

KEY FACTS

- *Resident Evil* was released as *Biohazard* in Japan, but as a DOS game called *Biohazard* already existed in the US, an internal competition was held at Capcom to come up with a new name for the Western market

- *Resident Evil* is the only entry in the franchise to feature a 'best-case scenario' ending as Capcom was unsure how the game would fare financially.

- A Director's Cut of *Resident Evil* was later released, though all it really did was make inventory and item management systems more tediously complex

■■■ Unlike a lot of games considered to be game-changing in their impact, *Resident Evil* still holds up today. The controls may have aged, but the game's appeal hasn't. Returning now, 20 years later, even the dialogue is still appealing; there's enough accidental humour to be found from the legendarily terrible translation and localisation. Every aspect of the game augments the game's B-movie values and intent.

You'll still feel a rush of fear as you knowingly remove an old shotgun from a wall, only to encase poor Jill Valentine in a room with a descending ceiling trap. You'll laugh minutes later as good ol' Barry Burton declares, "That was too close; you were almost a Jill sandwich." It's a line delivered with a unique blend of accidental sarcasm and hammy acting, and it's all a part of *Resident Evil*'s success story.

The original *Resident Evil* built a franchise and a genre seemingly out of nowhere, and that sort of success shouldn't be overlooked – even if the former has been a disappointing cycle of diminishing returns over the last two decades. From its unique blend of horrific creatures, clunky controls and perplexing handling, to the desperate hunt for ink ribbons and green herbs, Resident Evil has stood the test of time with its challenging combat and scare-heavy gameplay. Whether that success can ever truly be replicated by the franchise again remains to be seen, though with the original standing the test of time so excellently, it may never need to.

GAME CHANGERS

THE SEQUELS RANKED FROM WORST TO BEST

WHICH OF THE MAIN SERIES ENTRIES HAVE STOOD THE TEST OF TIME?



RESIDENT EVIL 5

■ Following the success of *Resident Evil 4*, Capcom elected to take the franchise further towards action, and the result is a game that sold well, but stood in stark contrast to the reasons we fell in love with the original *Resident Evil*. This co-op-led action-adventure game would forever be viewed as a misstep.



RESIDENT EVIL 6

■ *Resident Evil 6* should have been a big success for Capcom, but it suffered from a problem we very rarely see in this industry: it included too much content. So much, so in fact, that it tried to appease all of the different fans of *Resident Evil* that it had cultivated with a four-part split narrative adventure, but failed to do any one section with finesse.



RESIDENT EVIL: 0

■ *Resident Evil: 0* had its moments, but ultimately it stuck too closely to the original *Resident Evil* format to make any great strides forward. The pre-rendered backgrounds were a delight, as was investigating the events that led to the Spencer Mansion incident, but the story and clunky character switching mechanic ultimately let it down.



RESIDENT EVIL: CODE VERONICA

■ A step forward for the franchise – taking *Resident Evil* into 3D as the pre-rendered backdrops were abandoned – it's an unrelenting adventure that tested the skills (and patience) of anybody that dared step to it. It suffered from some pacing issues, but *Code Veronica* still holds up as a must play for any *Resi* fan.



RESIDENT EVIL 3: NEMESIS

■ Set in the 24 hours preceding *Resident Evil 2*, Capcom took this as an opportunity to introduce us to one of its all time greatest villains: Nemesis. This seemingly unstoppable creature is hot on your heels throughout the adventure. Resident Evil 3 evokes the kind of fear that the best slasher films of the Eighties were aiming for.



RESIDENT EVIL 2

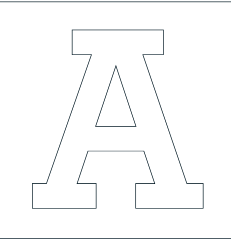
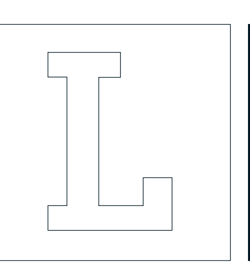
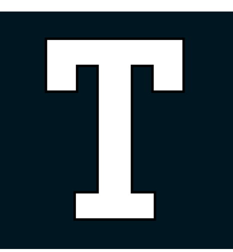
■ *Resident Evil 2* is the closest we've come to receiving a survival horror masterpiece. Set in Raccoon City as the Umbrella outbreak consumes all, *RE2* features incredible level design and an unrelenting pace as Leon and Claire struggle to escape the city before it's scorched off the earth.





RESIDENT EVIL 4

■ This is one of those rare games that comes along but once a generation and changes everything. Just as *Resident Evil* originally created the survival horror genre, *Resident Evil 4* went ahead and re-invigorated third-person action-adventure games with horror. Shinji Mikami was faced with an almost impossible task when he approached *Resident Evil 4* – determined to advance the franchise he helped create back in 1996 – and so he decided to overthrow everything about it. The static camera was replaced by a tight over-the-shoulder POV; the combat was dynamic and tense throughout, and the enemy design was nothing short of inspired. There will never be another game quite like *Resident Evil 4*.

THE 
VAULT

FIGHTSTICK TE S+

MANUFACTURER: **MAD CATZ** PRICE: **£179.99**



FOR THOSE THAT want the authentic arcade experience with *Street Fighter V*, this customisable fightstick offers the perfect blend of great build quality and fantastic gameplay feedback. Pop the screws on top of the panel and you can remove the top casing, giving you the option to change buttons, positions and even the top plate itself for a different design of your choice.

In terms of control, the fightstick is everything *SF* fans could want. The stick itself and the buttons beside it feel sturdy and well-made; we were happy to bash away at them during an intense match without fear of damaging anything. The great news for fighting fans in general is that a small switch on top of the casing allows you to switch between PS3 and PS4 – so if you have an older console and want to enjoy earlier games with the same great controller, you can.

It's worth noting that this is a competition-level fightstick, too, and that you really do get what you pay for with controllers like this. For those wanting to up their game, this is an excellent choice – but if you crave even more customisation options and don't mind stretching the budget a little, you could even opt for the TE2+, which is this stick's big brother.



FIGHTPAD PRO

For *SFV* fans on a budget , this more entry-level controller is a pretty good choice. Six face buttons on the front of the controller and a slightly altered grip make this a good option for gamers wanting quicker access to combos, although the single stick makes it difficult to play other games outside of the fighting genre.

Manufacturer: **Mad Catz**
Price: **£49.99**



FIGHTSTICK ALPHA

This doesn't use the same Sanwa parts that are found in the TE S+, and the difference in quality is noticeable. However, the price point is much easier to swallow, and swapping out parts is extremely easy – so you can upgrade if you wish. Not a bad choice, but we prefer the other two.

Manufacturer: **Mad Catz**
Price: **£69.99**

GAMING CLOTHING



THE DIVISION SHD EMBLEM T-SHIRT

Show your allegiance to the Division agents in New York with this tee from Numskull. It's official, which launched alongside the game in March, and features the SHD phoenix emblem all fans are sure to recognise.
www.numskull.co.uk



LUM COLLECTOR T-SHIRT

We love this one because it's very subtle. *Rayman* fans will know exactly what it's supporting, while those that have never played the games will probably just like the awesome skull motif.
www.insertcoinclothing.com



ASSASSIN'S CREED SYNDICATE FRYE JACKET

The latest in a long line of pointed hoodies has landed with this *Syndicate*-inspired coat. Apart from the *Assassin's Creed* logo on the shoulders and a unique hood design, this is just a nice jacket.
www.insertcoinclothing.com

SEIKO NEXTAGE MGSV WATCH



SOLD BY: **SEIKO** PRICE: **£299.99**

WHEN HIDEO KOJIMA designed Big Boss' timepiece from *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*, he based the shape and appearance on a Seiko watch that he used to wear back in 1984. Konami has now partnered with Seiko once again to recreate the very watch that Big Boss wears in the game, including the retro LCD display and a chunky metal chain. The face itself features the same layout as Big Boss' own, and each one of the 2,500 limited edition devices features an inscription on the back.
w-wired.com

ROMAIN JEROME SUPER MARIO BROS.

SOLD BY: **ROMAIN JEROME** PRICE: **£13,500**

THIS LIMITED EDITION watch has only 84 brothers and sisters, and was designed in Switzerland by the high-end watchmaker Romain Jerome. While you might need to remortgage your house or sell your entire videogames collection to have a chance at owning one, this stunning watch is sure to impress. The black PVD-coated titanium case is remarkable, and draws the eye to the retro *Super Mario Bros* sprites that decorate the face of the watch. No gimmicks or cheap animations here, just pure retro goodness wrapped up in class.
www.romainjerome.ch

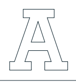


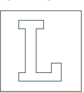


FALLOUT 4 TRANQUILITY LANE VAULT BOY WATCH

SOLD BY: **BETHESDA** PRICE: **£42.65**

THE SECOND EDITION of this popular watch design brings the future-retro styling of the Vault Boy onto your wrist. It's a simple enough design – a twist on the classic Mickey Mouse watch in which the character's arms act as the hands on the watch-face. The difference here is that the watch is plated in gold ion metal, and features a genuine leather band. You'll get 30 metres of water resistance and a scratch resistant lens, too. Unfortunately, the Tranquility Lounger is sold separately.
store.bethsoft.com




LARA CROFT AND THE BLADE OF GWYNNEVER

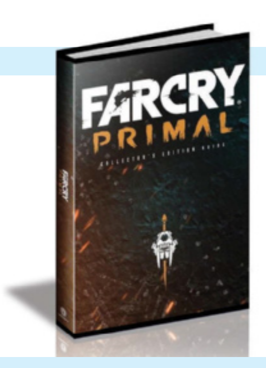
PUBLISHER: **DK CHILDREN**

FOR THOSE THAT can't stand the wait for the next entry in the rebooted *Tomb Raider* series, we have good news – Crystal Dynamics has partnered with bestselling British novelist and comic book writer Dan Abnett to create a new story to tide you over. Surprisingly enough, this adventure sees Lara Croft embark on yet another quest for a mysterious and priceless antiquity that may or not have mythical powers. After a ruthless competitor beats her to the punch in recovering this relic in Sri Lanka, Lara heads back to her huge family mansion in London, licking her wounds. She soon receives a call from an old friend who needs her help, learning that something unique and strange has been discovered during an excavation under London itself. Because people are *always* doing huge archeological digs under London…

From here, the story launches into full *Tomb Raider* mode, with the discovery sparking a stunning revelation that Lara soon realises may change history forever. Soon enough, she is drawn into a dangerous game of espionage and conspiracy that sees her setting off on a globe-trotting mission to recover yet another precious item from a long-lost part of the world.

It might all sound like a story we've heard Lara tell before, but this promises to be something of a call-back to the games of old, with some serious dual-pistol-wielding action and the witty repartee that Lara has been missing slightly from her recent, more serious adventures on Xbox One and PS4. If anything, this story has more in common with the twin-stick shooter series. So, whether you're a fan of the games, or are just looking for a rip-roaring adventure packed with action and intrigue that features an iconic hero, this should be well worth a look when it launches in July.

www.amazon.com









FAR CRY PRIMAL: COLLECTOR'S EDITION GUIDE

If you've ventured out into the deadly wilds of *Far Cry: Primal*, you've most likely been wondering "how do I complete all the quests, craft all of the items and learn more about the native flora?" Never fear – this guide answers all of these questions… and more!

www.forbiddenplanet.com

MIRROR'S EDGE CATALYST: THE POSTER COLLECTION

To celebrate the latest game's release, Dark Horse Comics produced this collection of twenty high-quality prints – a first for the series. You'll see faith running, jumping and generally parkouring hard through the City of Glass.

www.forbiddenplanet.com

DEUS EX: BLACK LIGHT

The second full novel set in the *Deus Ex* universe, *Black Light*, is set to launch in August alongside the game itself (if that ever actually comes out). It follows Adam Jensen after the Aug Incident and the destruction of Panchaea, and will bridge the gap between *Human Revolution* and *Mankind Divided.*

www.forbiddenplanet.com



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